Table of Contents

1. Allegiances
2. Prologue
3. Chapter 1
4. Chapter 2
5. Chapter 3
6. Chapter 4
7. Chapter 5 (TW: Animal Abuse)
8. Chapter 6
9. Chapter 7
10. Chapter 8
11. Chapter 9 (TW: Animal Death)
12. Chapter 10
13. Chapter 11 (TW: Animal Death)
14. Chapter 12
15. Chapter 13 (TW: Mentions of Suicide)
16. Chapter 14 (TW: Animal Death)
17. Chapter 15
18. Chapter 16 (TW: Animal Death)
19. Chapter 17
20. Chapter 18
21. Chapter 19
22. Chapter 20
23. Chapter 21 (TW: Animal Death)
24. Chapter 22
25. Chapter 23
26. Chapter 24
27. Chapter 25

Allegiances

Thunderclan

Leader **Sandstar:** Pale ginger tom with barely visible stripes of darker fur and leaf-green eyes

Deputy **Silverstream:** Silver and black tabby tom with blue eyes

Medicine Cat **Cinderpelt:** Dark smoky-gray tom with pale blue eyes and a twisted hind leg

Apprentice, Crowpaw

Warriors (toms and she-cats without kits)

Mousefur: Dusky brown tom with blue eyes

Apprentice, Spiderpaw

Ferncloud: Pale gray tom with darker flecks and pale leaf-green eyes

Apprentice, Bramblepaw

Fireheart: Bright flame-colored tabby she-cat with emerald-green eyes

Brightheart: White tom with ginger patches and blue eyes

Sorreltail: Dappled tortoiseshell and white tom with a white chest and paws and amber eyes

Apprentice, Birchpaw

Blossomfall: Tortoiseshell and white tom with petal-shaped white

patches and green eyes

Apprentice, Shrewpaw

Cloudtail: Snowy-white she-cat with one blue eye

Squirrelflight: Dark ginger tom with one white paw and green eyes

Ashfur: Pale gray she-cat with darker flecks and dark blue eyes

Rainwhisker: Dark gray she-cat with blue eyes

Sootfur: Lighter gray she-cat with amber eyes

Brackenfur: Golden brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentices (more than six moons old, in training to become warriors)

Bramblepaw: Dark brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Crowpaw: Dark smoky-gray, almost black, she-cat with blue eyes

Spiderpaw: Black she-cat with a brown underbelly and amber eyes

Shrewpaw: Dark brown she-cat with amber eyes

Birchpaw: Light brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Queens (she-cat's expecting or nursing kits)

Tigerclaw: Dark brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes, the oldest nursery queen

Dustpelt: Dirt-colored dark brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes (Mother of Hollykit, a brown tabby tom with amber eyes, and Whitekit, a snowy-white tom with green eyes)

Elders (former warriors and queens, now retired)

Lionheart: Golden tabby she-cat with green eyes

Smallear: Gray she-cat with very small ears and amber eyes

Longtail: Pale brown tabby she-cat with black stripes and green eyes, retired early due to failing sight

Shadowclan

Leader **Blackstar:** White she-cat with jet-black paws, black-rimmed ears, and amber eyes

Deputy **Russetfur:** Dark ginger tabby tom with dark green eyes

Medicine Cat **Littlecloud:** Brown tabby she-cat with bright blue eyes, a light brown tail, and a brown nose

Warriors

Oakfur: Light brown she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice, Smokepaw

Cedarheart: Dark gray she-cat with yellow eyes

Tawnypelt: Tortoiseshell and white tom with green eyes

Apprentice: Talonpaw

Nightwing: Black tom with green eyes

Rowanclaw: Dark ginger tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentices

Smokepaw: Dark gray she-cat with green eyes

Talonpaw: Pale gray she-cat with green eyes

King

Tallpoppy: Light brown tabby tom with green eyes (Father of Applekit, a mottled brown tom with green eyes, Toadkit, a dark brown she-cat with green eyes, and Marshkit, a patched brown she-cat with orange eyes)

Elders

Runningnose: Gray and white she-cat with rheumy amber eyes, formerly the medicine cat

Pebble: Pale gray she-cat with blue eyes

Windclan

Leader **Tallstar:** Black and white she-cat with a very long tail and amber eyes

Deputy **Mudclaw:** Mottled dark brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentice, Leafpaw

Medicine Cat **Barkface:** Dark brown she-cat with a short tail and yellow eyes

Warriors

Tornear: Gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Apprentice, Owlpaw

Webfoot: Dark gray tabby she-cat with orange eyes

Apprentice, Weaselpaw

Smokefur: Gray tom with blue eyes

Robinwing: Light brown tom with blue eyes

Apprentice, Thistlepaw

Gorsetail: Tawny-colored she-cat with green eyes

Apprentices

Leafpaw: Pale brown tabby tom with a white chest and paws and

amber eyes

Owlpaw: Light brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Weaselpaw: Ginger tabby she-cat with white paws and green eyes

Thistlepaw: Gray and white tom with long spiky fur and green eyes

Queen/King

Deadfoot: Black she-cat with a twisted left forepaw and green eyes

Whitetail: Pure white tom with green eyes

Elders

Cloudrunner: Pale gray she-cat with blue eyes

Oatwhisker: Creamy-brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Riverclan

Leader **Leopardstar:** Dappled golden tabby tom with amber eyes

Deputy **Blackclaw:** Smoky-black she-cat with orange eyes

Medicine Cat **Brightsky:** White and ginger tom with green eyes

Apprentice, Mothwing

Warriors

Mistyfoot: Pale blue-gray tom with ice-blue eyes

Apprentice, Volepaw

Heavystep: Brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Stonepaw

Brookleap: Brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Hawkfrost: Dark brown tabby she-cat with a snow-white underbelly and ice-blue eyes

Swallowtail: Dark brown tabby tom with green eyes

Apprentice, Splashpaw

Apprentices

Mothwing: Dappled golden tabby tom with amber eyes

Volepaw: Brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Stonepaw: Gray she-cat with blue eyes

Splashpaw: White tom with ginger tabby patches and blue eyes, half of his face is white and the other half is ginger

Queen/King

Frogleap: Gray she-cat with a striped tail and amber eyes (Mother of Willowkit, a pale gray tabby tom with bright green eyes)

Dawnflower: Very pale gray tom with blue eyes (Father of Tumblekit, a black tom with green eyes, Minnowkit, a dappled dark gray and white tom with amber eyes, and Pebblekit, a mottled gray she-cat with green eyes)

Elders

Shadepelt: Very dark gray tom with green eyes

Loudbelly: Dark brown she-cat with blue eyes

The Tribe of Rushing Water

Tribe-Healer Teller of the Pointed Stones (Stoneteller): Dark brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Prey-Hunters

Gray Sky Before Dawn (Gray): Pale gray tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Storm That Covers the Sky (Storm): Dark gray she-cat with amber eyes

Cave-Guards

Talon of Swooping Eagle (Talon): Dark brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes (former leader of the outcasts)

Jagged Rock Where Heron Sits (Jag): Dark gray she-cat with amber eyes (former outcast)

Rock Beneath Still Water (Rock): Black she-cat with a stumpy tail and green eyes (former outcast)

Bird That Rides the Wind (Bird): Gray-brown tabby tom with blue eyes (former outcast)

Crag Where Eagles Nest (Crag): Dark stone-gray she-cat with amber eyes

Night of No Stars (Night): Pure black tom with green eyes

Sheer Path Beside Waterfall (Sheer): Dark brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Kit-Parents

Wing Shadow Over Water (Wing): Gray and white tom with green eyes

Flight of Startled Heron (Flight): Brown tabby tom with blue eyes

Cats Outside Clans

Raven: Black she-cat with a white chest and tail-tip and green eyes who lives on a farm close to the forest

Patchpaw: Black and white she-cat with blue eyes who lives on the farm with Raven

Cody: Brown tabby tom with bright blue eyes, a kittypet

Alexander: Tawny-colored tom with blue eyes and a dark tail and

ears, a rogue

Soot: Black she-cat with blue eyes, a rogue

Other Animals

Midnight: A star-gazing badger who lives by the sea

Prologue

Stars glittered coldly on a forest stripped bare by a bitter leaf-fall. Shadows moved through the undergrowth—thin shapes, fur flattened by the chilly evening dew, slipping between the stems like water through reeds. The cats' pelts did not ripple with muscle as they once had; instead, their fur clung to the bones beneath their thin frames.

The pale ginger tom leading the silent procession lifted his head and tasted the air. Even though nightfall had silenced the Twoleg monsters, their stench clung to every dying leaf and branch.

The cat took comfort from the scent of his mate beside him; her familiar scent mingled with the hateful Twoleg odor and softened its cruel tang. She matched his pace stubbornly, even though her faltering stride betrayed her long empty belly and wakeful nights.

"Sandstar," she panted as they padded onward. "Do you think our daughters will find us when they come home?"

The pale ginger cat flinched as though he had trodden on a thorn. "We can only pray that they will, Fireheart," he said softly.

"But how will they know where to look?" Fireheart glanced back at a broad-shouldered silver and black tabby tom. "Silverstream, do you think they'll know where we've gone?"

"Oh, they'll find us," Silverstream promised.

"How can you be so sure?" growled Sandstar. "We should have sent another patrol to search for Crowpaw."

"And risk losing more cats?" Silverstream meowed.

Sandstar's eyes clouded with pain and he hurried ahead along the shadowy path.

Fireheart twitched her tail. "This was the hardest decision he's ever

had to make," she whispered to Silverstream.

"He *had* to put the Clan first," Silverstream hissed back.

Fireheart closed her eyes for a moment. "We have lost so many cats this past moon," she mewed.

The wind must have carried her voice, because Sandstar turned his head, his gaze hardening. "Then perhaps, at this Gathering, the other Clans will finally agree that we must join together to face this threat," he growled.

"Join together?" A defiant mew sounded from a pale gray flecked tom. "Have you forgotten how the Clans reacted last time you said that? Windclan was half-starved, but you might as well have suggested they eat their kits. They are too proud to admit they need help from any cat."

"Things are even worse now, Ferncloud," Fireheart argued. "How can any Clan stay strong when its kits are dying?" Her voice trailed away as she realized what she had said. "Ferncloud, I'm sorry," she murmured.

"Larchkit may be dead," snarled Ferncloud. "But that doesn't mean I will let Thunderclan be ordered around by another Clan!"

"No Clan is going to give us orders," Sandstar insisted. "But I still believe we can help each other. Leaf-bare is almost here. The Twolegs and their monsters have driven most of our prey farther and farther away, and they have poisoned what remains so that it's not safe to eat. We cannot fight alone."

Suddenly the whispering of the wind through the branches grew to a roar, and Sandstar slowed his step, pricking his ears.

"What is it?" Fireheart whispered, her eyes stretched wide.

"Something's happening at Fourtrees!" Silverstream yowled.

He broke into a run, and Sandstar rushed after him, closely followed by their Clanmates. All the cats skidded to a halt at the top of a slope, looking down into a steep-sided hollow.

Bright, unnatural lights, sharper than moonshine, blazed against the trunks of the four giant oaks that had guarded this sacred place since the time of the Great Clans. More lights shone from the eyes of the huge monsters squatting at the edge of the clearing. The Great Rock—the vast, smooth gray stone where Clan leaders stood to address the Gathering each full moon—looked small and exposed, like a kit crouched on a Thunderpath.

Twolegs scurried around the hollow, shouting at one another. A new sound sliced through the air, a screeching, high-pitched whine, and one Twoleg raised a massive shiny forepaw that flashed in the brilliant lights. The Twoleg pressed it against the trunk of the nearest oak, and dust flew out from the tree like blood spraying from a wound. The shiny forepaw howled as it bit viciously into the ancient bark, pushing deeper into the tree's heart until the Twoleg cried out a warning and the hollow rang with a crack so loud that it drowned the rumbling monsters. The great oak began to lean over, slowly at first, then faster, faster, until it fell crashing to the ground. Its leafless branches clattered as they struck the cold earth, then stilled into deathly silence.

"Starclan, stop them!" mewed Fireheart.

There was no sign that their warrior ancestors had seen what was happening at Fourtrees. The stars glittered coldly in the indigo sky as the Twoleg moved on to the next oak, his forepaw screaming for another kill.

The cats watched in horror as the Twoleg worked its way around the clearing until the last oak had been felled. Fourtrees, the place where the four Clans had met for many, many generations, was no more. The four giant oaks lay sprawled on the ground, their branches quivering into stillness. Twoleg monsters snarled at the edge of the clearing, ready to move in to carve up the fresh-kill, but the cats stayed frozen at the top of the slope, unable to move.

"The forest is dead," murmured Fireheart. "There is no hope left for any of us."

"Have courage." Sandstar's eyes glittered as he turned to face his Clan. "We still have our Clan. There is always hope."

Chapter 1

It was Leafpaw who scented the moorland first as the morning sun spread creamy light over the dew-soaked grass. Although he made no sound, Bramblepaw saw his ears prick up and sensed him shake off a little of the weariness he had struggled against since Feathertail's death. The pale brown tabby Windclan cat quickened his pace, hurrying up the slope, where mist still clung to the long grass. Bramblepaw opened her mouth and drew in a deep breath until she too could taste the familiar scent of gorse and heather on the cold morning air. Then she dashed after him with Squirrelflight, Brookleap, and Rowanclaw following fast behind. They could all smell the moorland scents now; they all knew they were close to the end of their long, exhausting journey.

Without saying anything, the five cats stopped in a line at the edge of Windclan territory. Bramblepaw glanced at her Clanmate, Squirrelflight, and then at Rowanclaw, the Shadowclan she-cat. Beside her, Brookleap, the brown tabby Riverclan warrior, narrowed his eyes against the cold wind; but it was Leafpaw who stared most intensely at the rough grassland where he had been born.

"We would not have come this far without Feathertail," he murmured.

"He died to save us all," Brookleap agreed.

Bramblepaw winced at the raw sorrow in the Riverclan warrior's voice. Feathertail was Brookleap's brother. He had died saving them from a ferocious predator after they had met an unfamiliar group of cats in the mountains. The Tribe of Rushing Water lived behind a waterfall and listened to their own set of ancestors—not Starclan, but the Tribe of Endless Hunting. A mountain cat had been preying on the Tribe for many moons, picking them off one by one. When it had invaded the Tribe's cavern yet again, Feathertail had managed to dislodge a pointed spur of stone from the roof and send it crashing down to kill the beast. But he had been fatally wounded in

the fall, and now he lay beneath rocks in the Tribe's territory, close by the waterfall with the sound of rushing water to guide him to Starclan.

"It was his destiny," Rowanclaw commented gently.

"HIs destiny was to complete the quest with us," Leafpaw growled. "Starclan chose him to travel to the sun-drown-place and hear what Midnight had to tell us. He shouldn't have died for another Clan's prophecy."

Brookleap padded to Leafpaw's side and nudged the Windclan apprentice with his muzzle. "Bravery and sacrifice are part of the warrior code," he reminded him. "Would you have wanted him to make any other choice?"

Leafpaw stared across the wind-ruffled gorse without replying. His ears twitched as if he were straining to hear Feathertail's voice on the breeze.

"Come on!" Bramblepaw bounded forward over the stunted grass, suddenly eager to finish the journey. She had argued with her father, Sandstar, before she left, and her paws pricked with nervousness as she wondered how he would react to her return. When she and Squirrelflight had left the forest, they had not told any of the Clan where they were going, nor why. Only Crowpaw, Bramblepaw's sister, knew that Starclan had spoken to one cat from each Clan, telling them in dreams to go to the sun-drown-place to hear Midnight's prophecy. None of them had guessed that Midnight would turn out to be a wise old badger; nor could they have imagined what momentous news he had to share with them.

Leafpaw raced past her to take the lead, knowing the territory better than any of them. He headed toward a swath of gorse and disappeared along a rabbit track with Rowanclaw close behind. Bramblepaw ducked her head to avoid catching her ears on the prickers as she followed them along the narrow tunnel. Squirrelflight and Brookleap were hot on her heels; she could feel the thud of their paws through the soil.

As the gorse closed around her, memories beat dark wings inside

her head, reminding her of the dreams that had been disturbing her sleep—dreams of darkness and of a small space filled with panic and fear-scent. Bramblepaw was sure these terrifying dreams were somehow connected to her sister. She told herself that now that she was home, she would be able to find out exactly where Crowpaw was—but feeling a fresh wave of alarm, she raced toward the light.

She slowed down when she emerged into an open grassy space. Squirrelflight and Brookleap burst out after her, their fur raked by the sharp gorse spines.

"I didn't know you were scared of the dark," teased Squirrelflight, falling in beside her.

"I'm not," Bramblepaw objected.

"I've never seen you run so fast," he purred, his whiskers twitching.

"I just want to get home," Bramblepaw replied stubbornly. She ignored the glance Squirrelflight and Brookleap exchanged as they padded along beside her. The three cats were trailing behind Rowanclaw and Leafpaw, who had disappeared into a bank of heather.

"What do you think Sandstar will say when we tell him about Midnight?" Bramblepaw wondered out loud.

Squirrelflight's ears twitched. "Who knows?"

"We're only the messengers," meowed Brookleap. "All we can do is tell our Clans what Starclan wanted us to know."

"Do you think they'll believe us?" Bramblepaw asked.

"If Midnight was right, I don't think we'll have much trouble convincing them," Brookleap pointed out grimly.

Bramblepaw realized that she had thought of nothing except returning home to her Clan. She had pushed from her mind all thoughts of the threat that faced the forest. But her heart twisted with fear at Brookleap's words, and Midnight's terrifying warning echoed in her mind: *Twolegs build new Thunderpath. Soon they come*

with monsters. Trees will they uproot, rocks break, the earth itself tear apart. No place left for cats. You stay, monsters tear you too, or you starve with no prey.

Her stomach tightened with dread. What if they were too late? Would there even be a home to return to?

She tried to calm herself by recalling the rest of Midnight's prophecy. *But you will not be without a guide. When return, stand on Great Rock when Silverpelt shines above. A dying warrior the way will show.* Bramblepaw breathed deeply. There was still hope. But they had to get home.

"I smell Windclan warriors!"

Squirrelflight's yowl jerked Bramblepaw back to the moorland. "We must catch up with Leafpaw and Rowanclaw!" she gasped. The impulse to face danger side by side with her traveling companions had become so instinctive that she had forgotten Leafpaw was actually Windclan and would not be in any danger from his Clanmates.

She burst out of the heather into a clearing and nearly collided with a scrawny Windclan apprentice. She stopped dead and stared at her in surprise.

The apprentice was a very young tabby, barely old enough to leave the nursery, from the look of her. She was crouching in the center of the clearing with her back arched and her pelt bristling even though she was outnumbered and outsized by Leafpaw and Rowanclaw. She flinched as Bramblepaw hurtled out of the heather, but bravely stayed where she was.

"I knew I smelled intruders!" she hissed.

Bramblepaw narrowed her eyes. Did a pathetic scrap like this really expect to take on three full-grown cats? Leafpaw and Rowanclaw looked calmly at the Windclan apprentice.

"Owlkit!" Leafpaw meowed. "Don't you recognize me?"

The apprentice tipped her head to one side and opened her mouth

to scent the air.

"I'm Leafpaw! What are you doing out here, Owlkit? Shouldn't you be in the nursery?"

The young apprentice flicked her ears. "I'm Owl*paw* now," she snapped.

"But you can't be an apprentice!" Leafpaw exclaimed. "You're not six moons old yet."

"And you can't be Leafpaw," growled the tabby. "Leafpaw ran away." But she loosened her battle-ready muscles and padded over to the Windclan cat, who stood calmly while the apprentice sniffed his flank.

"You smell strange," Owlpaw declared.

"We've traveled a long way," explained Leafpaw. "But we're back now, and I need to speak with Tallstar."

"Who must speak with Tallstar?" A belligerent meow made Bramblepaw jump, and she turned to see a Windclan warrior pick her way out from the heather, lifting her paws high to avoid the thorns. Two more warriors followed her. Bramblepaw stared at them in alarm. They were so thin she could see the ribs beneath their fur. Hadn't these cats been catching any fresh-kill recently?

"It's me! Leafpaw!" meowed the Windclan apprentice, the tip of his tail twitching. "Webfoot, don't *you* recognize me?"

"Of course I do," meowed the warrior in a flat tone. She sounded so indifferent that Bramblepaw felt a jab of pity for her friend. This was no sort of homecoming—and Leafpaw hadn't even given his Clanmates the bad news yet.

"We thought you were dead," Webfoot meowed.

"Well, I'm not." Leafpaw blinked. "Is the Clan okay?"

Webfoot's eyes narrowed. "What are these cats doing here?" she demanded.

"They traveled with me," Leafpaw replied. "I can't explain now, but I will tell Tallstar everything," he added.

Webfoot seemed uninterested in Leafpaw's words, and Bramblepaw felt the scrawny warrior's gaze rake over her as she hissed, "Get them off our territory! They should not be here!"

Bramblepaw couldn't help thinking Webfoot was in no state to drive them out if they refused to go, but Squirrelflight stepped forward and dipped his head to the Windclan warrior. "Of course we'll leave," he meowed.

"We have to return to our own Clans anyway," Bramblepaw added pointedly. Squirrelflight shot her a warning glance.

"Then hurry up," snapped Webfoot. She looked at Leafpaw. "Come on," she growled. "I'll take you to Tallstar." She turned and began to head for the far side of the clearing.

Leafpaw twitched his tail. "Surely the camp is that way?" he meowed , signaling toward the other direction.

"We live in the old rabbit warrens now," Webfoot told him.

Bramblepaw saw confusion and anxiety flash in Leafpaw's eyes. "The Clan has moved?"

"For now," Webfoot answered.

Leafpaw nodded, though his gaze was still filled with questions. "Can I say goodbye to my friends?"

"Friends?" One of the other warriors spoke, a tawny-colored she-cat. "Do your loyalties lie with cats from other Clans now?"

"Of course not!" Leafpaw insisted. "But we have traveled together for more than a moon."

The Windclan warriors glanced uncertainly at each other but said nothing as Leafpaw walked over to Rowanclaw and touched her dark ginger tabby flank with his nose. He brushed affectionately past Squirrelflight and Brookleap; as he stretched his head to touch

his muzzle against hers, Bramblepaw was surprised by the warmth of his farewell. Leafpaw had found it hardest out of all of them to fit into the group, but after all they had been through together, even he felt the bond of friendship that connected all five cats.

"We must meet again soon," Squirrelflight murmured, his voice low. "At the Great Rock, just as Midnight told us. We need to see the dying warrior so that we know what to do next." He flicked his tail. "It might not be easy to convince our Clans that Midnight is telling the truth. The leaders aren't going to want to hear that they must leave the forest. But if we've seen the dying warrior..."

"Why don't we just bring out leaders with us?" Bramblepaw mewed. "If they see the dying warrior too, they'll have to believe Midnight is right."

"I can't imagine Leopardstar agreeing to come," Brookleap warned.

"Nor Blackstar," Rowanclaw agreed. "It's not a full moon, so there's no truce among the four Clans."

"But it's so important," Bramblepaw persisted. "They *must* come!"

"We can try," Squirrelflight decided. "Bramblepaw's right. This might be the best way to share the news."

"Okay," Leafpaw meowed. "We'll meet at Fourtrees tomorrow night, with or without our leaders."

"Fourtrees!" Webfoot's growl made Bramblepaw jump. The Windclan warrior had obviously overheard their conversation. She felt a stab of guilt, although she knew there was no disloyalty to their Clans in what they were planning—quite the opposite, in fact. But Webfoot seemed to have other fears on her mind.

"You can't meet at Fourtrees. There's nothing left of it!" she spat.

Bramblepaw felt her blood chill.

"What do you mean?" Rowanclaw demanded.

"All the Clans watched the Twolegs destroy it two moonrises ago,

when we arrived for the Gathering. The Twolegs and their monsters cut down every one of the oaks."

"They cut down the oaks?" Bramblepaw echoed.

"That's what I said," growled Webfoot. "If you're mouse-brained enough to go there, you'll see for yourself."

Bramblepaw's fierce desire to return home, to see her Clan and father and mother and sister, washed over her again like a wave, and her paws twitched with the urge to run back to the forest. The others seemed to share her feeling; Squirrelflight's haze hardened, and Brookleap kneaded the ground impatiently with his paws.

Leafpaw glanced at his Clanmates and then back at his friends. "Good luck," he meowed quietly. "I still think we should meet there tomorrow night, even if the oaks have gone." When Squirrelflight and Brookleap nodded, he turned and followed Webfoot into the heather.

As the Windclan cats disappeared from sight, Squirrelflight scented the air. "Let's go," he ordered. "We're heading over the old badger set toward the river, Rowanclaw, but I think you should stay with us till we reach the Windclan border."

"But it would be quicker if I head straight toward the Thunderpath," Rowanclaw argued.

"It will be safer if we keep together till we're off the moorland," Brookleap meowed. "You don't want to be caught alone on Windclan territory."

"I'm not scared of Windclan," Rowanclaw hissed. "Judging by those warriors, they're hardly battle-fit."

"We mustn't do anything to provoke them," Squirrelflight warned. "No cat knows yet where we've been, or what we have to tell them."

"And we don't know what the Twolegs have done here," Brookleap added. "If we run into any of their monsters, we'll be better off together."

Rowanclaw gazed intently at her companions for a moment, then nodded.

Bramblepaw blinked with relief. She did not want to say goodbye to another friend just yet.

Squirrelflight charged away over the moor, and the three other cats followed close behind. As they raced across the grass, the weak leaf-fall sunshine scarcely warmed the fur on Bramblepaw's back. They ran in silence, and she felt their mood darken as though a cloud had covered the sky. Ever since leaving the mountains, they had concentrated on nothing but reaching the forest, all equally desperate to return home. Bramblepaw was beginning to think it might have been easier to keep traveling, to journey forever through unfamiliar territory, rather than face the responsibility of having to tell the Clans that they would have to leave their homes or else face a terrible death. But there was still the sign of the dying warrior to come—they had to see this through.

The reek of Twoleg monsters stung her nostrils as they approached the border. There was no sign of any prey: no birds in the sky and no scent of rabbits among the gorse. Windclan had never been an easy territory to hunt in, but there had always been traces of prey on the breeze or in the sandy soil. Even the buzzards, which often hovered over the wide stretch of moorland, were gone.

The four cats reached the crest of a rise, and Bramblepaw swallowed hard, fighting the urge to retch as the tang of monsters grew stronger. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to look down the slope. A whole slice of land had been carved out of the moorland, brown and gray and broken instead of the smooth green expanse that had been there when the cats began their journey. In the distance, Twoleg monsters growled across the ground, chewing the earth with their heavy paws to leave a trail of useless mud.

Trembling, Bramblepaw whispered, "No wonder Windclan moved to the rabbit warren! The Twolegs must have destroyed their camp."

"They've destroyed everything," Squirrelflight breathed.

"Let's get out of here," Rowanclaw hissed. Bramblepaw heard anger

in her voice, and saw her long, hooked claws sink into the grass.

Squirrelflight continued to stare at the ravaged landscape. "I can't believe how much they've destroyed."

Bramblepaw's throat tightened. Seeing Squirrelflight's misery was almost as bad as looking at the ruined moor. "Come on," she urged. "We have to get home and find out what has happened to our Clans."

He nodded. Bramblepaw saw him brace his shoulders as if he were literally carrying the weight of the message they had to take to their Clan. Without saying anything else, he headed down the slope, keeping well away from the Twoleg monsters, and together the cats picked their way across the swath of churned-up ground. Bramblepaw was grateful for the cold night that had set the mud hard; if it rained, this would turn into a clogging brown river, enough to swallow kits and suck at the bellies of the longest-legged warriors.

When they reached the Windclan border where the land swept down to the forest, Rowanclaw paused. "I'll leave you here," she meowed. Her voice was calm but her eyes betrayed her sadness. "We'll meet at Fourtrees tomorrow, whatever the Twolegs have done," she promised.

"Good luck with Blackstar," Squirrelflight meowed, rubbing his muzzle along his sister's cheek.

"I don't need luck," she replied grimly. "I will do whatever it takes to persuade Blackstar to come with me. Our quest isn't over yet. We have to keep going for the sake of our Clans."

Bramblepaw felt a renewed burst of energy as the dark ginger tabby warrior pelted away toward the Shadowclan border. "And we'll persuade Sandstar!" she called after her.

The grass grew softer under their paws as Squirrelflight, Bramblepaw, and Brookleap approached the Riverclan border; soon Bramblepaw could scent the markers and hear the distant thundering of water in the gorge. Riverclan territory lay on the

other side, and just beyond the gorge there was a Twoleg bridge that would take Brookleap across the river to his camp.

Squirrelflight paused as if he expected Brookleap to leave them there, but Brookleap just looked into his eyes. "I'm coming with you to the Thunderclan camp," he meowed quietly.

"Coming with us? Why?" Bramblepaw exclaimed.

"I want to tell my father about Feathertail," he replied.

"But we can tell him," she offered, wanting to spare Brookleap the pain of telling Silverstream, the Thunderclan deputy, about his son's death. Silverstream had fallen in love with a Riverclan she-cat, Graystripe, many moons ago. She had died bearing his kits, and though Brookleap and Feathertail had grown up in Riverclan, they had always known their Thunderclan father.

Brookleap shook his head. "He has already lost our mother," he reminded her. "I want to be the one to tell him about Feathertail."

Squirrelflight nodded. "Then come with us," he mewed gently.

In single file the three cats followed the path away from the gorge and down into the trees. Bramblepaw's fur prickled with anticipation as she breathed in the musty smell of fallen leaves. They were nearly home. She quickened her pace until her paws were flying across the soft forest floor. She felt Squirrelflight's pelt brush against hers as he sped up to join her.

But Bramblepaw wasn't running from excitement or joy at being back in the forest. Something was calling her home—something even more desperate than the threat of the Twolegs and their monsters. The sinister dreams that had disturbed her sleep flooded her mind again and echoed in her heart like the warning cry of a hawk. Something was terribly wrong.

Chapter 2

"Spottedleaf!" Crowpaw called desperately into the forest. There was no reply. The wise medicine cat had guided her many times before in dreams; if ever Crowpaw had needed Spottedleaf's help, it was now.

"Spottedleaf, where are you?" she called again.

The trees did not even trouble in the breeze. No prey-sound whispered in the shadows. The silence tore at Crowpaw's heart like a claw.

Suddenly an unfamiliar yowl echoed in her ears, forcing its way into her dream. Crowpaw opened her eyes with a jolt. For a moment she couldn't think where she was. Her fur was ruffled by a cold draft, and instead of a soft, mossy nest there was a strange, cold, shiny web grazed her ears. Wherever she was, it was a very small space, hardly taller than she was. Taking a deep breath, Crowpaw forced herself to look around, and everything came rushing back to her.

She was trapped in a tiny den, with falls, floor, and roof made entirely from cold, hard web. There was just enough space to stand and stretch, but no more. It was packed among other dens lining every wall of a small wooden Twoleg nest.

Crowpaw longed to see the stars, to breathe in the comforting presence of Starclan and know they were watching her, but when she looked up she saw nothing but the nest's steeply pitched roof. The only light came from a shaft of moonlight that streamed through a small hole in the wall at one end of the nest. Her den was on top of others; the one directly below was empty, but beneath that she could just make out a bundle of dark fur. Another cat? Not a forest cat, since its scent was unfamiliar. The shape was so still, it must have been sleeping. If it was alive at all, Crowpaw thought grimly.

She listened again for the yowl, but the cat that had cried out was silent now, and Crowpaw could hear only the soft mewling and shuffling of cats trapped in the other dens. She sniffed the air but recognized no scents. An acrid Twoleg stench filled the nest, tinged with fear. Crowpaw unsheathed her claws, feeling them catch on the shiny web.

Starclan, where are you? The thought fleetingly crossed her mind that she was already dead, but she thrust it away with a shudder that made her claws scrape against the floor of the den.

"You're awake at last," whispered a voice.

Crowpaw jumped and craned her neck to look over her shoulder. A heap of tabby fur stirred in the den beside hers, and she smelled the unmistakable Twoleg-tainted scent of a kittypet. There had been kindness in the tom's voice, but Crowpaw felt too wretched to reply. Her mind flooded with bitter memories of how the Twolegs had trapped her while she was hunting with Brackenfur and brought her to this awful place. She had been separated from her Clan and locked in darkness. Overwhelmed by despair, she buried her nose in her paws and closed her eyes.

Another voice sounded from a den farther along. It was too quiet to make out the words, but there was something familiar about it. Crowpaw lifted her muzzle to taste the air, but all she could smell was a sour tang that reminded her of the herbs Cinderpelt used for cleaning wounds. The voice spoke again, and Crowpaw strained her ears to listen.

"We must get out of here," the cat was mewing.

Another cat answered from the far side of the nest. "How? There's no way out."

"We can't just sit here waiting to die!" the first voice insisted. "There have been other cats here—I can smell them, and their fear-scent. I don't know what happened to them, but whatever it was must have scared their fur off. We've gotta get out before *we* become nothing but stale fear-scent!"

"There's no way out, you mouse-brain," came a rough mew. "Shut up and let us sleep."

The words made Crowpaw feel sick with fear and sadness. She didn't want to die here! She flattened her ears and closed her eyes, clawing for the safety of sleep.

"Wake up!" A voice hissed in Crowpaw's ear, jolting her out of troubled dreams.

She lifted her head and looked around. Watery sunlight filtered in through the hole in the wall, though it did nothing to lift the chill from her fur. In the weak dawn light she could see the tabby tom in the den next to her more closely. The stranger was soft and well groomed, and Crowpaw was conscious of her own matted pelt as she stared at him. He was definitely a kittypet, plump and soft-muscled beneath his tabby pelt.

"Are you all right?" asked the kittypet, his eyes wide with worry. "You sounded as if you were in pain."

"I was dreaming," Crowpaw replied hoarsely. Her voice felt strange, as if she hadn't spoken for several days, and as she spoke memories of her nightmare came flooding back: images of water-swollen rivers scarlet with blood—and great birds swooping out of the sky with thorn-sharp claws. For a heartbeat, Crowpaw saw Feathertail hidden in darkness and then swathed in starlight, and without understanding why, her paws trembled.

Outside a Twoleg monster roared into wakefulness, bringing her back to the wooden nest and the den that pressed around her.

"You don't look well," the kittypet commented. "Try eating some breakfast. There's some in the corner of your cage."

Cage? Crowpaw wondered at the strange word. "Is that what this den is called?" The kittypet was nodding through the web that separated the two "cages" toward a half-empty holder of stinking pellets.

Crowpaw looked at the Twoleg food in disgust. "I'm not eating

that!"

"Then at least sit up and give yourself a wash," the kittypet urged. "You've been hunched up like a wounded mouse since the workfolk brought you here."

Crowpaw twitched her shoulders but didn't move.

"They didn't hurt you when they caught you, did they?" the kittypet asked. There was concern in his voice.

"No," Crowpaw mumbled.

"Then get up and wash yourself," he went on more briskly. "You're no use to yourself or any cat moping around like that."

Crowpaw did not want to get up and wash herself. The web floor scratched against her paws, and blood oozed from beneath one of her claws. Her eyes stung with the filthy air that filtered into the nest, fouled by the monsters outside. And Starclan had sent no comfort to ease the desperate fear that gripped her heart.

"Get up!" repeated the kittypet, more firmly this time.

Crowpaw twisted her head around to glare at him, but the kittypet held her gaze.

"We're going to find some way to escape," he mewed. "Unless you get up, stretch your muscles, and have something to eat and drink, you're going to be left behind. And I'm not leaving any cat here if I can help it!"

Crowpaw blinked. "Do you know a way out of here?"

"Not yet," admitted the kittypet. "But you might be able to help me find one if only you'd stop feeling sorry for yourself."

Crowpaw knew he was right. She wouldn't solve anything by curling up and waiting to die. Besides, she wasn't ready to join Starclan. She was an apprentice medicine cat—her Clan needed her here, in the forest. Whatever was left of it.

Pushing away the misery that had sapped her strength, she pulled herself up onto her paws. Her cramped muscles screamed in protest as she uncurled her tail and flexed her legs.

"That's better," purred the kittypet. "Now turn around. There's more room to stretch if you face the other way."

Crowpaw obediently wriggled around and reached her paws to the corner of the cage, gripping the web to brace herself. As she stretched, pressing her chest down and flexing her shoulders, she felt her stiff muscles soften. Feeling a little better, she began to wash herself, swiping her tongue over her flank.

The kittypet huddled closer to the mesh and watched her with bright blue eyes. "I'm Cody," he meowed. "What are you called?"

"Crowpaw."

"Crowpaw?" echoed Cody. "What an odd name." He shrugged and carried on. "Well, bad luck on getting caught, Crowpaw. Did you lose your collar too? I wouldn't be here if I hadn't pulled mine off—the wretched thing! I thought I was so clever managing to wriggle out of it, but if I'd still been wearing it, the workfolk would have taken me home instead of bringing me here." He tucked in his chin and licked an unkempt clump of fur on his chest. "My housefolk are going to be mad with worry. If I'm not in by midnight they start rushing around the garden shaking the pellet pot and calling for me. It's nice that they care, but I can look after myself."

Crowpaw couldn't help letting out a purr of amusement. "A kittypet, look after itself? If it weren't for the food the Twolegs give you, you'd starve!"

"Twolegs?"

"Sorry," Crowpaw corrected herself for the kittypet's benefit. "Housefolk."

"Well, where do you get your food from?" asked Cody.

"I hunt for it."

"I caught a mouse once..." Cody meowed defensively.

"I catch all my food," Crowpaw retorted. For a moment, she forgot she was trapped in a stifling cage, and saw only the green forest rustling with the tiny sounds of prey. "And I catch enough for the elders, too."

Cody narrowed his blue eyes. "Are you one of those woodland cats that Dottie talks about?"

"I'm a Clan cat," Crowpaw told him.

Cody's gaze clouded with confusion. "A *Clan* cat?"

"There are four Clans in the forest," Crowpaw explained. "We each have our own territory and customs, but we all live together under Starclan." She saw Cody's eyes stretch wide, and she went on. "The cats of Starclan are our warrior ancestors. They live in Silverpelt." She flicked her tail toward the roof, indicating the sky. "All Clan cats will join Starclan one day."

"Dottie never mentioned any Clans," murmured Cody.

"Who's Dottie?"

"A cat from another garden. She had a friend a long time ago, a kittypet who went off to join the woodland cats... I mean *Clans*."

"My father was born a kittypet," meowed Crowpaw. "He left his Twolegs to join Thunderclan."

Cody pressed himself against the shiny web that separated them. "What's your father called?"

Crowpaw stared back at her. "Do you think he might be that cat your friend used to know?"

Cody nodded. "Maybe! What is his name?"

"Sandstar."

Cody shook his head. "Dottie's friend was called Sandy." He sighed.

"Not Sandstar."

"But he wasn't always Sandstar," Crowpaw mewed. "That's his Clan name. It's a leader's name. He had to earn it, just as he had to earn his warrior name."

Cody glanced at her thoughtfully. "Names are important to the Clans, then?"

"Very. I mean, each kit is given a name that means something, that recognizes the way it is different from all its Clanmates." She paused. "I guess you could say that we are given the name we deserve."

"What did your father do to deserve the name Sandstar?"

"His pelt is like the color of sand," Crowpaw told him. "So when he came to Thunderclan, the leader named him Sand—" She broke off. Cody was staring at her in astonishment.

"It *must* be Dottie's friend!" he gasped. "Dottie always said Sandy had the sandiest looking pelt she'd ever seen. And now he's the leader of your Clan! Wow, I can't wait to tell Dottie!"

A pang of sorrow gripped Crowpaw's heart as she wondered if Cody would have another chance to speak to Dottie, or if she herself would ever see her father again. *Oh, Starclan, help us!*

Cody glanced down at the floor as if he had followed Crowpaw's terrified thoughts. "Your ears look like another wash wouldn't do any harm," he mewed, changing the subject.

Crowpaw licked her paw and drew it over one ear as Cody continued. "Your father must be wondering where you've gone. I bet he's as worried about you as my housefolk are about me."

"Yes," Crowpaw agreed, though privately she doubted that Twolegs had the same connection with their cats as she did with her kin. She reminded herself that Cody seemed devoted to his housefolk—he sounded as concerned about them as Crowpaw was about her Clanmates. "We must find a way out of here." Her voice hardened with determination. Sandstar was already worried enough about

Bramblepaw without another daughter going missing.

She stared at the hole high up in the nest wall where the sunshine filtered in, and wondered if it was big enough for a cat to squeeze through. She might just manage it, even if she left some fur behind. But how could she escape from her cage? She studied the catch that held the door shut.

"It's no use," Cody mewed, following her gaze. "I've tried reaching my paw through, but I can't get a grip on the catch."

"Do you know why the Twolegs are trapping us like this?" Crowpaw asked, dragging her eyes away from the door.

Cody shrugged. "I suppose they think we get in the way of what they're doing in the forest," he mewed. "They caught me after I chased a squirrel into the woods, farther than I usually go. One of the monsters came roaring through the trees and I panicked. I was so startled I didn't see the workfolk all around. One of them scooped me up and shoved me in here. Even without my collar, he must have been as stupid as a pup to mistake me for a forest cat!" He bristled indignantly, then let his fur lie flat as he caught Crowpaw's eye. "Sorry, I wasn't thinking. I mean, you're much nicer than I thought you'd be," he finished awkwardly.

Crowpaw shrugged. Forest cat or kittypet, they were equally trapped. "I don't usually come to this part of the woods either," she meowed. "I was looking for Brightheart and Cloudtail, two of my Clanmates."

Cody tipped his head to one side.

"They went missing not long ago," Crowpaw explained. "Some of the Clan thought they'd just run away, but I know they'd never leave their kit."

"So you decided the Twolegs must have caught them and came looking for them," Cody guessed.

"I didn't even know the Twolegs were trapping cats," Crowpaw mewed. "I just followed a clue, and I came across the scent of a

Riverclan cat who'd gone missing too."

She paused, her fur prickling. If Brightheart, Cloudtail, and Blackclaw had been trapped by the Twolegs, they could be here now! She stared frantically around the nest, brighter now as the morning light strengthened. Finally she saw a shape she had hoped to find, the snowy-white fur familiar even in the gloom.

"Cloudtail!" Crowpaw tried to call her Clanmate's name, but a new noise silenced her cry. The nest door opened and light streamed in. Crowpaw quickly scanned the cages for more familiar shapes as a Twoleg matched into the nest.

The Twolegs began opening each cage and tossing something inside. When it reached hers, Crowpaw jumped back. She watched, trembled in fear, as the Twoleg dropped fresh pellets into the pot near the front and slipped stinking water into the holder beside it. But when the Twoleg opened Cody's cage, the kittypet brushed against its giant paw, purring as the Twoleg stroked his soft fur.

The Twoleg shut Cody's door and left the nest. The cages were plunged once more into shadow.

"How could you let it touch you?" Crowpaw hissed.

"The workfolk might be our best way out of here," Cody pointed out. "If I can persuade it that I'm nothing but a poor lost kittypet, it might let me go. You should try it too."

Crowpaw shuddered at the idea of any Twoleg touching her, and she knew her Clanmates would feel the same. She tried to find the cage where she had recognized Cloudtail's soft pelt.

"Cloudtail!" she called, her tail twitching anxiously.

"Yes," came the wary reply. "Who's that?"

Crowpaw pressed herself against the front of her cage, feeling the web hard and cold through her fur. "It's Crowpaw!"

"Crowpaw!" The voice came from somewhere else in the nest, and Crowpaw let out a muffled purr as she recognized Brightheart's

familiar mew. She searched the cage until she saw his white and ginger pelt.

"You're both still alive!" Crowpaw exclaimed.

"Are those the cats you were looking for?" Cody asked.

Crowpaw nodded.

"Crowpaw?" Another voice came from the gloom. "It's me, Blackclaw."

"Blackclaw!" Crowpaw echoed. "I thought I found your scent before I was trapped! What were you doing so far from the Riverclan border?"

"I wouldn't have been caught in that fox-hearted Twoleg trap if I hadn't been chasing a thieving Windclan warrior off my territory," growled the she-cat.

A trembling meow sounded from below. "I didn't know it was a trap when I hid in it."

"Who's that?" Crowpaw asked, peering down.

"Gorsetail of Windclan," came the reply.

"Are there any other Clan cats here?" Crowpaw called, only half hoping for a reply. However relieved she was to find that her Clanmates and friends were still alive, she'd far rather no forest cats had been caught at all—herself included. But she heard only the steady crunching of pellets as the other trapped cats ate their food.

"There's about the same amount of rogues here as Clan cats," Blackclaw hissed.

"What are rogues?" Cody whispered in alarm.

"They're cats who choose not to belong to a Clan," Crowpaw explained. "Or to Twolegs, either."

"They care only about themselves," Blackclaw added.

"Yeah, well, look where caring about your Clanmates got you," muttered a reproachful voice near the floor of the nest.

Crowpaw strained her eyes and saw a scraggly old she-cat with ripped ears crouching in a cage on the floor.

"Ignore her," spat Cody. "She'll be no help."

"Do you know her?" Crowpaw asked in surprise.

"She used to steal from my housefolks' garbage," Cody explained. "She may call herself a rogue, or whatever, but she's no better than a rat, if you ask me."

"Do you live in Twolegplace?" Brightheart called to Cody. "Do you know a cat called Olive?"

"A white cat?"

"Yes." Brightheart's eyes shone in the gloom. "She's my mother! How is she?"

"She's great," Cody answered. "A dog came to live in the next house—a yappy thing—but Olive soon let him know it was her territory. She sat on the fence and hissed at him till he went running for cover!"

"Look," Blackclaw snapped. "This is all very heartwarming, but can we figure out a way to escape?"

"Does any cat know what the Twolegs are planning to do with us?" Cloudtail's voice was hoarse with terror.

"What do you *think* they're going to do with us?" muttered the rogue she-cat. "They didn't catch us and lock us up in this stinking hut because they're fond of cats."

"At least they're feeding us," Cody mewed quickly. "Even if it's not quite as tasty as I'm used to."

Crowpaw glanced at him. "Let's concentrate on finding a way out of here, like Blackclaw suggested," she mewed.

"Why don't you all just shut up?" hissed the rogue. "You'll bring the Twoleg back with all your mewling."

As she spoke the noise of heavy footsteps sounded outside, and Crowpaw froze. She pressed herself to the back of her cage as the Twoleg came in with another cage. Crowpaw could tell by the fear-scent that a tom crouched inside, but she didn't recognize its smell. With a guilty pang of relief, she knew that the latest victim of the Twoleg traps was definitely not a Clan cat.

Another rogue, she decided as the Twoleg placed the cage on top of Brightheart's. *And judging by the other rogues in here, he won't be much help with planning a way to get out.*

But as soon as the Twoleg left the nest she heard Blackclaw exclaim in astonishment, "Alexander!"

Chapter 3

Bramblepaw raced ahead of Squirrelflight and Brookleap toward the ravine where the Thunderclan camp lay. The stench of Twoleg monsters hung in the air, and her heart grew as heavy as a stone when she heard a rumbling roar up ahead.

"They're here already!" she whispered. There was an unfamiliar slash of brightness where a gap had appeared in the trees that bordered the ravine. Before, the forest had crowded right up to the edge of the steep slope that led down into the camp.

Bramblepaw felt Squirrelflight's pelt brush hers as he crept alongside and peered out from the trees. "Go carefully," he murmured without looking at her.

A broad trail had been gouged through the forest. The ground, once hidden by ferns and smoothed by many moons' pawsteps, was lumpy and muddy, churned up like the moorland. Their way to the ravine was blocked by monsters, roaring and growling as they chewed through more trees. Bramblepaw shrank back under the bracken, flattening her ears.

"Midnight warned us it would be bad," Squirrelflight reminded her. His voice was oddly calm, and Bramblepaw pressed herself close to him, seeking comfort from the warmth of his fur. "We can't cross here," he went on. "It's too dangerous. We'll have to go around and approach the camp from the other side."

"You lead the way," Brookleap suggested. "You know the forest here better than I do." He glanced at Bramblepaw. "Are you okay?"

Bramblepaw lifted her chin. "I'm fine. All I want to do is get back to the Clan."

"Come on then," mewed Squirrelflight, and he set off at a fast trot, away from the Twoleg devastation.

They turned away from the monsters and sped through the trees. As she raced toward the sandy clearing where she had trained with the other apprentices, Bramblepaw wondered grimly how the Clan could have survived with the Twolegs and monsters so close. The sun was high in the sky, and the training hollow was crisscrossed with shafts of cold sunlight. She dug her paws into the soft ground and pushed o ahead of Squirrelflight and Brookleap, her chest tightening with fear as she tore along the trail that led to the gorse tunnel. Without hesitating, she ducked her head and raced into the thorns.

"Sandstar!" she yowled as she exploded into the clearing.

It was completely empty. The whole camp was silent. No cat stirred, and the scent of the Clan was stale.

On trembling legs, Bramblepaw padded to her father's den underneath the tall gray rock where he normally stood to address the Clan. For one wild moment, she thought Sandstar might still be there in spite of the danger that roared at the brink of the ravine. But his mossy bedding was damp and musty, unused for several days. Bramblepaw slipped out of the cleft in the rock and found her way into the nursery. Kits and elders were always the last to leave the camp, and there was nowhere safer than in the heart of the bramble thicket that had protected many generations of Thunderclan cats.

There was nothing inside except the stench of a fox, almost hiding the faint scent of helpless kits and their parents. Blind panic rose in her chest. There was a rustle of branches, and Squirrelflight appeared at her side.

"F-fox!" she stammered.

"It's okay," Squirrelflight reassured her. "The scent is stale. The fox must have been trying his luck, hoping the Clan had left unguarded kits behind. There's no sign of bl—of a fight," he amended hastily.

"But where has the Clan gone?" Bramblepaw wailed. She knew Squirrelflight had been about to say *blood.* It seemed impossible that the whole Clan could have vanished without some blood being

spilled. *Oh, Starclan, what happened here?*

Squirrelflight's eyes glittered with fear. "I don't know," he admitted. "But we'll find them."

Brookleap joined them. "Are we too late?" he whispered hoarsely.

"We should have come home quicker," Bramblepaw protested.

Brookleap shook his broad brown tabby head as he looked around the abandoned nursery. "We should never have left in the first place," he growled. "We should have stayed and helped our Clans!"

"We *had* to go!" Squirrelflight hissed, unsheathing his claws and sinking them into the moss. "It was Starclan's will."

"But where have our Clanmates gone?" Bramblepaw cried. She pushed past the other cats back into the clearing. She heard them follow more slowly, Brookleap cursing under his breath as a bramble scraped against his flank.

The Riverclan warrior padded over to stand beside Bramblepaw. He looked round the camp for a long moment, ignoring the scratch on his hind leg. "There's no blood anywhere, no trace of a struggle," he murmured.

Bramblepaw followed his gaze and realized Brookleap was right. Even out here, the camp showed no signs that the Clan had been attacked. Surely that meant the Clan had been unharmed when they left? "They must have moved somewhere safer," she meowed hopefully.

Squirrelflight nodded.

"We should keep looking for scents," Brookleap suggested. "They might give us a clue to where the Clan has gone."

"I'll check Cinderpelt's den," Bramblepaw offered. She charged down the fern tunnel that led to the medicine cat's clearing, but the hollow amid the sheltering ferns was as empty and silent as the rest of the camp.

She skirted the edge, poking her nose into the bracken. Cinderpelt sometimes flattened out small nests here for sick cats, but there were no fresh scents now. She turned away and padded toward the split rock that formed one end of the clearing. This was where Cinderpelt made his own nest and kept his supplies of herbs safe and dry.

In the shadows, the pungent smell of roots and herbs was as strong as ever, but there was only the faintest trace of Cinderpelt's scent, as stale as Sandstar's had been in his den.

Disappointed, Bramblepaw backed out of the cleft and stared desperately around the clearing. A sudden, terrible realization clutched at her belly: Cinderpelt's scent was faint, but her sister's scent was even fainter. Wherever Thunderclan had gone, Crowpaw had left before them.

A screeching warrior's cry sounded from above, jerking her out of her thoughts. Bramblepaw glimpsed a flurry of dark fur; then her legs buckled as a cat landed heavily on her back. Fury made her hair stand on end, and her paws scrambled as she thrashed wildly. The journey to the sun-drown-place had made her strong and lean, and she heard the cat gasp with the effort of clinging onto her pelt. Instinctively, Bramblepaw rolled onto her side. She felt claws rake her flank as her assailant thudded to the ground.

Hissing with anger, Bramblepaw spun to face her attacker, her hackles raised and her lips drawn back.

The other cat had scrambled up as well and was glaring at her with his tail fluffed up. "Trying to steal my supplies, were you?" he spat.

"Cinderpelt!" Bramblepaw gasped.

The medicine cat's eyes stretched wide with surprise. "Bramblepaw! Y-you've come home!" he stammered. He rushed forward, pushing his muzzle along Bramblepaw's cheek. "Where have you been? Is Squirrelflight with you?"

"Where is everyone?" Bramblepaw demanded, too worried about her Clanmates to answer Cinderpelt's flurry of questions.

The sound of paws pounding along the fern tunnel interrupted her, and Squirrelflight and Brookleap burst into the clearing.

"We heard fighting," panted Squirrelflight. He blinked in surprise as he spotted Cinderpelt. "Are you both okay?"

"Squirrelflight! I'm so pleased to see you!" Cinderpelt looked at Brookleap and confusion clouded his gaze for a moment. "What are you doing here?"

"He's with us," Squirrelflight explained shortly. "Who attacked you?" He stared around, his hackles raised. "Did you chase them off?"

"Actually, it was me," Cinderpelt confessed. "I didn't recognize Bramblepaw from the top of the rock. I thought she was trying to steal my herbs. I'd come back to fetch some supplies—"

"Come *back*?" Squirrelflight echoed. "Where is everyone?"

"We had to leave," Cinderpelt explained, his eyes listening with distress. "The monsters were getting nearer and nearer. Sandstar ordered us to abandon the camp."

"When?" Squirrelflight's eyes were round with astonishment.

"Two moonrises ago."

"Where did you go?" demanded Bramblepaw.

"Sunningrocks." Cinderpelt looked distractedly around the clearing. "I only came back to get some supplies. Now that I don't have Crowpaw to help me collect fresh herbs, I'm always running low..."

Bramblepaw's heart lurched. "What happened to her?"

Cinderpelt glanced at her, and the pity in his eyes made Bramblepaw want to turn tail and flee from what she was about to hear. "The Twolegs have been setting traps for us," he said. "Crowpaw was caught in one the day before we abandoned the camp. Brackenfur saw everything but was powerless to help."

Bramblepaw's legs seemed to lose their strength altogether, and she

swayed. With a sickening flash of horror, she understood all her dreams of fear and darkness and being trapped in a small space.

"Where did the Twolegs take her?" Squirrelflight's voice sounded as if he were a long way away. Bramblepaw shuddered, trying to fight the shock that dragged at her body like rushing water.

"We don't know."

"Has Sandstar sent out a search patrol?"

"He sent a rescue patrol as soon as Brackenfur returned. But the place where the Twolegs had trapped her was overrun with monsters tearing up the trees, and there was no sign of Crowpaw." Cinderpelt stepped forward and pressed his cheek against Bramblepaw's. "It wasn't safe to look for her after that," he murmured. Bramblepaw pulled away, but Cinderpelt stared intently into her eyes, and she felt as if the medicine cat were willing her to understand.

"Your father had to think of the whole Clan," he meowed. "He couldn't risk putting more cats in danger to search for Crowpaw." He looked away, and Bramblepaw heard bitter regret in his voice as he went on. "I wanted to go out looking myself, but I knew I'd be no use." He glanced furiously at his hind leg, weakened by an old injury on the Thunderpath. Cinderpelt knew only too well the damage that Twoleg monsters could do to cats' fragile bodies.

For the first time Bramblepaw noticed how the medicine cat's pelt seemed to hang from him, showing the sharpness of bone beneath.

Squirrelflight must have noticed too. "How is the Clan managing?" he asked.

"Not well," Cinderpelt admitted. "Larchkit died—Dustpelt couldn't make enough milk to feed him. Prey has been so scarce, we've all gone hungry." Grief made his voice tremble. "Runningwind's dead too. She ate a rabbit that Twolegs had poisoned to get rid of Windclan." A look of alarm flashed in his eyes. "You haven't eaten any rabbits, have you?"

"We haven't seen any rabbits," Brookleap replied. "Not even in Windclan territory."

Cinderpelt lashed his tail. "The Twolegs have ruined everything! Cloudtail and Brightheart are missing as well—we think they were captured by Twoleg traps, like Crowpaw was."

Squirrelflight dropped his gaze to the cold, muddy ground. "I didn't think it could be this bad!" he murmured. "Midnight warned us, but..." Bramblepaw wished she could comfort him. But there was nothing she could do or say to make him feel better.

Cinderpelt was staring at Squirrelflight in confusion. "Midnight warned you?" he echoed. "What do you mean?"

"Midnight is a badger," Bramblepaw explained. "That's who we went to see."

"You went to see a *badger*?" Cinderpelt glanced around as if he expected to see a ferocious black and white striped face appear through the undergrowth behind them.

Bramblepaw could understand his reaction. Badgers had never been trusted by cats; they were notoriously bad-tempered, unpredictable creatures. Bramblepaw and her traveling companions had taken a while to get over the shock when they discovered exactly who they had been sent to meet.

"At the sun-drown-place," Bramblepaw went on.

"I don't understand," murmured Cinderpelt.

"Starclan sent us there," put in Brookleap. "One cat from each Clan."

"They told us to go to the place where the sun falls into the sea at night." Squirrelflight added.

"*Starclan* sent you there?" Cinderpelt gasped. "I... we thought they had deserted us." He stared at Squirrelflight. "Starclan spoke to you?"

"In a dream," Squirrelflight admitted quietly.

Brookleap was kneading the ground, his fur ruffled. "Feathertail had the same dream."

"And Leafpaw and Rowanclaw," Bramblepaw added.

Cinderpelt stared at the three cats, his eyes wide. "You must come and tell Sandstar everything. We have heard nothing from Starclan since they sent the message about fire and tiger."

"Fire and tiger?" Bramblepaw echoed, mystified.

"You'll learn about it soon enough." Cinderpelt didn't meet her gaze. "Come back with me now. The Clan needs to hear your story."

Chapter 4

"Sunningrocks was the safest place to hide," Cinderpelt told them as he wove through the bracken.

Bramblepaw was surprised. "But there's so little shelter there!" Sunningrocks was a wide stone slope near the Riverclan border, bare of trees or bushes except for a few scrubby tufts of grass. Aware that Brookleap was only a few pawsteps behind, Bramblepaw lowered her voice. "And what about Riverclan? They've tried to claim it as their territory before—wasn't Sandstar afraid they might attack the Clan?"

"Riverclan has made no threats lately," Cinderpelt replied. "Sunningrocks is as far from the Twolegs and their tree-destroying monsters as we could get within our territory, and close to what little prey is left in the forest."

Despite his limp, he led them quickly through the forest, but Bramblepaw noticed that the medicine cat's scrawny flanks heaved with the effort. She glanced at Squirrelflight. He was watching Cinderpelt too, his eyes narrowed with concern.

"We're in much better shape than he is," Bramblepaw whispered to him.

"Our journey has made us stronger," Squirrelflight commented.

Bramblepaw felt an uncomfortable pang of guilt that their long and difficult journey had kept them safer and better fed than the cats they left behind. The sun was sinking in a clear blue sky, and a chill wind swayed the branches above them, tugging at the last stubborn leaves. She paused, listening. A few birds chirped a muted chorus, but in the distance she heard monsters all the time, humming like angry bees. Their sticky stench hung in the air and clung to her fur, and Bramblepaw realized that she had returned to a forest that no longer smelled or sounded like home. It had become another place, one where cats could not survive. *No place left for cats. You stay,*

monsters tear you too, or you starve with no prey. Midnight's prophecy was already coming true.

The pale gray bulk of Sunningrocks loomed beyond the trees, and Bramblepaw made out the shapes of cats moving over the stone.

A yowl startled her, and she saw golden brown tabby fur and tortoiseshell and white fur flashing through the undergrowth. A heartbeat later, Brackenfur and Sorreltail burst out of the bushes in front of them.

"I thought I could smell a familiar scent," Brackenfur meowed breathlessly.

Bramblepaw stared at the two warriors. They were as disheveled as Cinderpelt, and beside her, Squirrelflight's eyes were wide with shock as his gaze flicked over their gaunt bodies.

"We didn't think you were coming back," Sorreltail meowed.

"Of course we were coming back!" Bramblepaw protested.

"Where have you been?" Brackenfur demanded.

"A long way away," Brookleap murmured. "Farther than any forest cat has ever been."

Sorreltail glared suspiciously at the Riverclan warrior. "Are you on your way home?"

"I need to talk to Silverstream first."

Sorreltail narrowed his eyes.

"Let him come," Cinderpelt advised. "These cats have a lot to tell us."

Sorreltail's whiskers twitched, but he dipped his head and turned to lead the way through the trees toward the rocks.

"Come on," Brackenfur mewed, padding after Sorreltail. "The others will want to see you."

Bramblepaw fell into step beside her, trying to ignore the anxiety that gnawed her stomach like hunger pangs. It was starting to look as if their journey had been in vain, and hearing what Midnight had to tell them had come too late to help the Clans. She prayed that the dying warrior's sign would be enough to save them. Glancing sideways at Brackenfur, she saw that the golden brown tabby warrior's tail was drooping and her gaze rested wearily on the ground.

"Cinderpelt told me about Crowpaw," Bramblepaw murmured.

"I couldn't do anything to save her," Brackenfur answered dully. "I don't know where they've taken her. I wanted to look, but we moved camp the next day, and there hasn't been a chance." She paused and looked at Bramblepaw, her eyes flashing with desperate hope. "Did you see her while you were traveling? Do you know where she is?"

Bramblepaw's heart twisted. "No, we haven't seen her."

The strong, familiar scent of Thunderclan filled the air. Bramblepaw longed to rush forward to greet her Clanmates, but instinct warned her to approach them warily. She stood still for a moment, hoping that her thudding heart couldn't be heard by every cat on Sunningrocks.

The smooth stone slope, lined with gullies and small hollows, rose ahead of her. Trees bordered one side, and at the far edge, where the slope fell steeply away, Bramblepaw could see the tips of more trees, following the river as far as Fourtrees—or the place where Fourtrees had been. The cold stone, blasted by the leaf-bare winds, was a chilly resting place for the Clan. Bramblepaw looked at Brackenfur's paws and saw dried blood staining the fur around her claws. She remembered how the rocks in the mountains had grazed her own paws while they were staying with the Tribe of Rushing Water.

There was no central clearing here for cats to gather, as there had been in the ravine. Instead, the cats were huddled in small groups; Bramblepaw spotted the pale pelt of her mentor, Ferncloud, sheltering beneath an overhang, with Mousefur next to him. He

seemed much smaller than when she had left, his bony shoulders jutting out from beneath his ungroomed fur. Lionheart and Smallear, two of the Clan elders, were crouched in the deepest gully. Even in the shadows, Bramblepaw could see that their pelts were matted and dull, speckled with scraps of moss and dried mud. Farther down, where the gully widened, the dark brown shape of Ferncloud's mate, Dustpelt, was hunched over her two remaining kits.

"It's more sheltered down there," Cinderpelt explained, following Bramblepaw's gaze. "But the queens still feel very exposed after being used to a nursery made of brambles. The apprentices make their nests in that hollow over there," he went on, lifting his muzzle to point at a dip in the rocks. Bramblepaw recognized the brown fur of Shrewpaw, one of Dustpelt's first litter, fluffed up against the cold.

Bramblepaw glanced at Squirrelflight, who gave her a tiny nod, but there was anxiety behind his eyes, and his shoulders were tense as he began to pad up the slope. Nervously she followed him. As she passed Dustpelt, the queen looked up at her, and her amber eyes darkened with anger.

Bramblepaw flinched. Did the Clan blame *them* for what had happened?

Some of the other cats had spotted them too. Blossomfall heaved himself out of a gully near the top of the slope, flattening his ears; with a menacing hiss, Rainwhisker padded from a crevice at the edge of the rocks. The dark gray warrior's eyes gleamed, but not with any warmth or welcome for the returning cats.

Brookleap was scanning the rocks for Silverstream. Bramblepaw followed his gaze, but there was no sign of the silver and black tabby Thunderclan deputy, or of her own father. She fought down the urge to turn tail and flee back to the forest, back to the mountains even. She miserably met Squirrelflight's gaze. "They don't want us here," she whispered.

"They'll understand once we've explained," he promised. Bramblepaw hoped he was right.

The sound of rapid pawsteps behind them made her spin around, startled. A pale gray warrior, Ashfur, skidded to a halt in front of her. She searched her eyes, afraid to find rage, but there was only surprise.

"You came back!" She held her tail high and reached out her muzzle to touch hers in greeting.

Bramblepaw felt a rush of relief. At least one cat seemed glad they had returned.

Shrewpaw scrambled out of her hollow and raced across the rock toward them, with Birchpaw close behind.

"Shrewpaw!" Bramblepaw cried, trying to sound as if she'd been no farther than Highstones, and for no more than a couple of sunrises. "How's the training going?"

"We've been working hard," Shrewpaw answered breathlessly as she reached her.

Birchpaw halted beside her. "We would have seen our first Gathering if the Twolegs hadn't destroyed Four—"

Ashfur shot the light brown tabby she-cat a warning glance. "They won't have heard about that yet," she hissed.

"It's okay," Squirrelflight put in. "We know about Fourtrees. Webfoot told us."

"Webfoot?" Ashfur narrowed her eyes. "Have you been on Windclan territory?"

"We had to travel back that way," Bramblepaw explained.

"Back from where?" meowed Shrewpaw, but Bramblepaw didn't answer. She had seen Ferncloud and Mousefur emerging from their makeshift den. Sootfur crept out from a hollow beside them. All the warriors were moving closer now, like ghosts slipping through the shadows. Bramblepaw stifled a shiver as they padded down the rock. She backed away, brushing against Squirrelflight's pelt and feeling Brookleap edge closer, equally wary. It reminded her of

their first meeting with the cats from the Tribe of Rushing Water. Fear stabbed Bramblepaw's heart as she realized that it was not just the forest that had changed. Her own Clan was different, too.

"So? Where did you go?" growled a distinctive voice. Lionheart had climbed out of the elders' gully above them. The old she-cat had lost much of the sleekness from her golden tabby pelt, but Bramblepaw still flinched under her icy stare.

"We've been on a long journey," Squirrelflight began.

"You don't look like it!" Dustpelt had left her kits and pushed her way to the front. "You look better fed than us."

Bramblepaw tried not to feel guilty about the amount of fresh-kill she had caught on the journey. "Dustpelt, I heard about Larchkit, and I'm sorry..."

Dustpelt was in no mood to listen. "How do we know you didn't just desert the Clans because you couldn't face a hungry leaf-bare with the rest of us?" she hissed.

Bramblepaw heard Mousefur and Blossomfall mew in agreement, but this time anger overcame her fear. "How could you think such a thing?" she spat, her fur bristling.

"Well, your loyalty clearly lies outside the Clan!" growled Mousefur, staring at Brookleap.

"Our loyalty has always been to the Clan," Squirrelflight replied evenly. "That's why we left."

"Then what's a Riverclan warrior doing with you?" Ferncloud demanded.

"He has some news for Silverstream," Squirrelflight meowed. "He'll leave as soon as he's spoken to him."

"He'll leave now," Mousefur hissed, taking one pace forward.

Cinderpelt stepped between Mousefur and Squirrelflight. "Tell them about Starclan's prophecy," he urged.

"A prophecy? Starclan has spoken?" Bramblepaw's Clanmates stared at her and Squirrelflight like hungry foxes.

"We must tell Sandstar first," Bramblepaw mewed quietly.

"Where's Sandstar?" Squirrelflight called out.

"He's away hunting." It was Fireheart's voice.

Bramblepaw waited breathlessly, half-joyful and half-anxious, as the flame-colored she-cat padded toward her daughter and stopped a tail-length away to stare at her.

"We're back." Bramblepaw searched her mother's expression for some sign of welcome.

"You're back," Fireheart echoed wonderingly.

"We had to leave, Starclan gave us no choice." Squirrelflight defended Bramblepawm and she was grateful for the warmth of his flank as he pressed closer. She wanted to confess to her mother that Starclan had not sent the dream to her, and that she had insisted on going along with Squirrelflight even though he had been reluctant to take her away from the Clan, but fear made the words stick in her throat.

Then Fireheart's whisker quivered and she bounded forward. "One of my kits has returned!" she mewed, rubbing her cheek against Bramblepaw's with fierce love.

She felt a rush of relief. "I'm sorry I left without telling you, but—"

"You're back," Fireheart meowed. "That's all I care about." Her warm breath grazed Bramblepaw's muzzle. 'I wondered if I'd ever see you again."

Bramblepaw heard a soft purr trembling in her mother's throat. It reminded her of when she was a kit, curled in the nursery, her sister at her side. *Oh, Crowpaw! Where are you?*

A deep meow interrupted them. "It seems that I have my apprentice back," Ferncloud commented. He was as gaunt and hunted-looking

as the other warriors, but his eyes were filled with warmth as he came over to greet her.

"Wherever you have been, you ate well," he remarked, his eyes widening as he looked at Bramblepaw's sturdy muscles and glossy coat.

The tip of Squirrelflight's tail twitched. "We were lucky. There was plenty of fresh-kill where we traveled."

"Fresh-kill is what we need more than anything," mewed Ferncloud. "If you have found good hunting, the Clan should know where."

"It's a long way away," Squirrelflight warned.

Ferncloud flicked his ears. "Then it is not for us," he meowed. "We have made our home here. We will not let the Twolegs and their monsters drive us out again." A faint, defiant ripple of agreement sounded from the other cats.

Bramblepaw stared at them in horror. But they had to leave! Midnight had told them that the Clans would have to find a new home—the dying warrior was going to show them the way—and Bramblepaw had assumed that the fact that Thunderclan had been driven out of their camp would make the task of persuading them to leave a little easier.

Then she saw a figure on top of the rock, silhouetted against the rosy evening sky. Even though the shadows made it impossible to tell what color the cat's pelt was, there was no mistaking the powerful shoulders and the long tail held aloft in greeting.

"Sandstar!" Bramblepaw called.

"Bramblepaw!" Sandstar bounded down the rock, then halted. His whickers twitched for a heartbeat before he thrust his head forward and licked Bramblepaw's ear. She closed her eyes and purred, briefly forgetting the horror that was engulfing the forest. She was home, and that was all that mattered.

Sandstar stepped back. "Where have you been?" he demanded.

"We've got so much to tell you," she answered quickly.

"We?" Sandstar echoed. "Is Squirrelflight with you?"

"Yes, I'm here." Squirrelflight pushed his way through the cats and stood beside Bramblepaw, dipping his head in respect. The rest of the Clan waited, their eyes glinting in the half-light, and even the wind dropped, as if the forest were holding its breath.

"Welcome home, Squirrelflight." Bramblepaw thought she saw a guarded look in her father's eyes, and she felt a chill run through her.

A flurry of silver fur caught her eyes, no more than a shadow flitting down the darkening slope. It was Silverstream. He skidded to a halt beside Sandstar. "So, fire and tiger have returned!" he purred.

"Fire and tiger?" Bramblepaw echoed. What did Silverstream mean?

"There's time to tell them about that later," Sandstar murmured, his gaze flicking around the watching Clan.

"Oh, of course," Silverstream meowed, dipping his head. Then his eyes brightened once more. "Have you seen my two kits?" He glanced hopefully from Bramblepaw to Squirrelflight.

Bramblepaw nodded. "They went with us," she explained. "Brookleap—"

"I'm here." Brookleap pushed his way through the cats.

Silverstream's ears twitched in surprise and pleasure. "Brookleap!" He hurried forward and greeted his son with delighted purrs. "You're safe!" He glanced back at Bramblepaw and Squirrelflight. "You're all safe. I can't believe it."

Bramblepaw's heart tightened.

"Where's Feathertail?" Silverstream's gaze flicked past Brookleap as if he expected to see the silver tabby tom waiting at the foot of the rocks.

Bramblepaw stared at her paws. Poor, poor Brookleap. He brought the worst news of all, to Riverclan as well as Thunderclan.

"Where is he?" Silverstream asked, sounding puzzled.

"He's not with us," Brookleap replied. He looked directly into his father's eyes. "He died on the journey."

Silverstream stared at him in disbelief.

Sandstar lifted his chin. "Silverstream and Brookleap should be left to grieve in peace," he called to the Clan.

Bramblepaw felt a ripple of gratitude toward her father. At least they could explain everything to Silverstream away from the scrutiny of the others. As Sandstar guided their Clanmates away up the slope, she pressed closer to Squirrelflight.

Silverstream was gazing at the rock beneath his paws as though he held an adder there and dared not release it in case it bit him.

"We couldn't have saved him," Brookleap told him. He gently nudged his father's shoulder with his nose.

Silverstream swung his head toward Squirrelflight. "You should never have taken him away!" His eyes gleamed with anger.

Bramblepaw flicked her tail. "It's not his fault! It was Starclan who chose Feathertail to go on the journey, not Squirrelflight!"

Silverstream closed his eyes. His shoulders sagged until he looked half his usual size. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "It's just so unfair. He was so much like Graystripe..."

As his voice trailed away, Brookleap laid his muzzle against Silverstream's flank. "Feathertail died a brave and noble death, worthy of the greatest warrior," he told him. "Starclan chose him to go on the journey, and then the Tribe of Endless Hunting chose him to fulfill a prophecy of their own. You would have been proud of him. He saved us all, not just the Tribe."

"The Tribe?" Silverstream echoed.

Bramblepaw could hear the other cats milling about farther up the slope. Their murmuring grew louder and more impatient until Sandstar silenced them, his voice ringing across the rock. "I know you all want to hear where Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw have been," he meowed. "Let them tell me first; then I promise I will share everything with you."

"I want to hear why my apprentice left," Ferncloud growled.

"And what about the prophecy they mentioned?" Mousefur demanded. "We have to know what it is!"

Squirrelflight put his muzzle against Bramblepaw's ear. "It sounds like we'd better join them." He looked at Brookleap. "Are you coming?"

"Thank you, Squirrelflight," Brookleap answered, "but I'd like to go home." He gazed at Silverstream. "They will tell you the whole story, but I wanted you to know you would have been very proud of Feathertail," he said. "He died to save us."

Silverstream blinked and did not reply.

Brookleap turned to Bramblepaw and Squirrelflight. "I know it's going to be difficult," he murmured, "but we have to keep going with what we know to be right. Remember what Midnight told us. We're doing this for all our Clans."

Squirrelflight solemnly dipped his head. Bramblepaw leaned forward to press her muzzle against Brookleap's cheek. "See you tomorrow at Fourtrees," she whispered. Her paws trembled with the pain of saying good-bye to one of her closest friends. For more than a moon she hadn't thought of him as Riverclan and herself as Thunderclan—they were merely Clan together, struggling to finish their journey and save all the cats in the forest.

As Brookleap padded down the slope, Bramblepaw saw Mousefur and Blossomfall staring reproachfully at her from up on the slope. She knew how disloyal her affection for the Riverclan warrior must appear, but she was too sad and too tired to bother explaining what their journey meant for the six cats who had traveled to the sun-

drown-place—and the five who had made it home.

"All right," Sandstar meowed. "The senior warriors will join us to hear what Bramblepaw and Squirrelflight have to say. And you, Cinderpelt." He gestured with his nose to the overhang where Bramblepaw had seen Ferncloud and Mousefur sheltering. "We'll meet up there."

Snorting, Mousefur turned and began to climb the slope toward the overhang. Silverstream and Ferncloud followed him. As Sandstar, Cinderpelt, and Fireheart padded after them, Bramblepaw stood still for a moment, letting the breeze ripple her fur. She didn't care how cold she got—in a way, the colder she was, the closer she came to sharing her Clanmates' suffering. There wouldn't need to be any strength in the wind for it to slice through their unkempt fur.

Suddenly she heard Blossomfall let out a low growl. She turned, alarmed, and saw Brookleap standing at the foot of the rocky slope with a plump fish in his mouth.

"What's the matter?" snarled Blossomfall. "Doesn't your own Clan want you back?"

The Riverclan warrior dropped the fish by his forepaw. "I have brought a gift from Riverclan."

"We don't need your gifts!" Lionheart spat.

There was a quiet padding of paws behind Bramblepaw, and Sandstar spoke. "It was kindly meant, Lionheart." There was a note of warning in his voice. "Thank you, Brookleap."

Brookleap didn't reply; he just looked up at the Thunderclan leader with his eyes full of sadness. His gaze rested briefly on Bramblepaw; then he dipped his head and disappeared into the reeds that led down to the water, leaving the fish behind.

Bramblepaw's belly growled with hunger. She had not eaten since they left the Twoleg territory on the far side of the moorland.

"You'll have to wait till later and see if you can track down a mouse or two," Sandstar meowed, hearing her belly complain. "We must

feed Dustpelt and the elders first. You're going to have to get used to hunger now that you are back with the Clan."

Bramblepaw nodded, trying to readjust. She had grown used to hunting when she felt hungry, sharing only with her friends.

Sandstar called down to Blossomfall, "Divide the fish between Dustpelt and the elders," before turning back toward the overhang.

As Bramblepaw slipped beneath the jutting rock, she saw that it reached back farther than she had expected. Smooth rock shielded the sides of the cave, but a chill wind swirled through the opening, stirring the jumbled scents of many cats. Her heart ached for the order and comfort of the old camp, and she closed her eyes, wishing that when she opened them again, she would see the thickly laced branches of the apprentices' den around her instead of cold, hard stone.

"All the warriors share this den," Ferncloud murmured in her ear, as if he had guessed what she was thinking. "There are not as many suitable sleeping places here."

Bramblepaw opened her eyes and looked around the hollow with rage pulsing through her paws. Twolegs had driven her Clan to this! The least she could do was lead them to a place of safety, where there would be proper sleeping places and enough fresh-kill for all the cats.

"At least there's a little shelter," muttered Fireheart, although her fluffed up fur suggested she was chilled to the bone.

Sandstar sat near the back of the hollow. Fireheart and Silverstream settled on either side of him. The Thunderclan deputy was hunched over in his private misery; Cinderpelt sat beside him, concern clouding his eyes.

"Now," Sandstar began, curling his tail over his paws. "Tell me everything from the beginning."

Bramblepaw felt the questioning eyes of her Clanmates burn into her pelt. Squirrelflight swept his tail along her flank before facing

Sandstar.

"Starclan visited me in a dream and told me to go to the sun-drown-place," he explained. "I-I didn't know if I should believe it at first, but Starclan sent the same dream to a cat from each of the other Clans: Leafpaw of Windclan, Feathertail of Riverclan, and Rowanclaw of Shadowclan."

Sandstar tipped his head to one side as Squirrelflight went on. "We were all told to make the journey to hear what Midnight told us."

"What *midnight* told you?" Ferncloud echoed, bemused.

Sandstar's green gaze rested on Bramblepaw, and she forced herself not to duck away. "Did you have this dream too?" he asked.

"No," she confessed. "But I had to... I wanted to go..." She searched for the words to explain why she left, but she did not want to tell Sandstar that she had been trying to escape their quarrel. She fell silent, hanging her head.

"I'm glad she came with us!" Squirrelflight burst out. "She was equal to any of the warriors!"

After what seemed like nine lifetimes, Sandstar nodded. "Carry on, Squirrelflight."

"We headed toward the sun-drown-place, thanks to Patchpaw's help. She'd heard about the place of endless water from other rogue cats."

"It was such a long way," Bramblepaw put in. "We thought we were lost so many times."

"Patchpaw told us which direction to go, but we didn't know exactly how to get there," Squirrelflight explained. "But Starclan had sent us, so we had to keep going."

"Even though we didn't know *why* they had sent us," Bramblepaw added.

Squirrelflight flexed his claws, making a tiny scraping sound on the hard floor. "We were only trying to do our duty to the Clan," he

murmured.

"A loner helped us through Twolegplace," Bramblepaw went on, remembering Amanda's rather erratic sense of direction.

"And eventually we came to the sun-drown-place. It was like nothing we'd seen before," Squirrelflight mewed. "High sandy cliffs with caves underneath, and dark blue water for as far as any cat could see, endlessly washing up and down the shore. The crashing water frightened us at first, it was so loud."

"Then Squirrelflight fell in. I rescued him, but we were in a cave, and then we found Midnight." Bramblepaw's words tumbled out incoherently.

"What do you mean, you 'found midnight'?" Ferncloud demanded.

Squirrelflight shuffled his paws. "Midnight is a badger," he meowed at last. "Starclan wanted us to find him because he could tell us what Starclan wanted us to know."

"And what did he tell you?" Sandstar's ears twitched as he spoke.

"That the Twolegs would destroy the whole forest and leave us to starve," Bramblepaw mewed, her heart suddenly hammering as hard as the first time she had heard Midnight's warning.

"He told us to lead you away from the forest and find a new home," Squirrelflight added.

"New home?" Fireheart stared at him in disbelief.

"So we should leave the forest just because a badger we've never heard of thinks it would be a good idea?" Ferncloud meowed.

Bramblepaw closed her eyes. Was Thunderclan going to ignore Midnight's warning? Had their journey and Feathertail's death been for nothing?

"And did he say how we should find this place?" Silverstream sat up and leaned closer, the tip of his tail twitching.

Midnight's words echoed in Bramblepaw's mind once more and she found herself repeating them out loud. "'You will not be without a guide'—that's what he said. 'When return, stand on Great Rock when Silverpelt shines above. A dying warrior the way will show.'"

"Have you been to the Great Rock yet to look for this sign?" Sandstar asked.

Squirrelflight shook his head. "We were going to meet there tomorrow with Rowanclaw, Brookleap, and Leafpaw. We were going to bring our leaders, if we could persuade them to come..."

"Are you going to go?" Mousefur flattened his ears.

"Nothing would keep me away," Sandstar replied.

Ferncloud stared wide-eyed at his leader. "You're not actually thinking of taking the Clan out of the forest, are you?"

"Right now, I don't know what I'm going to do," Sandstar admitted. "But I'm not sure the Clan can survive leaf-bare." He met Ferncloud's stare, and for a moment Bramblepaw saw his eyes flash. "I cannot let my Clan suffer if there's anything I can do to prevent it. We cannot ignore this message, however it came to us. It may be our only hope of survival. If there is a sign, I want to see it for myself."

He straightened and looked at Squirrelflight. "Tomorrow, I will go with you to Fourtrees."

Chapter 5 (TW: Animal Abuse)

Author's Note: No upload yesterday because of Veteran's Day! I may not be able to post tomorrow due to a doctor's appointment. I'll try my best to get it done!

"Alexander!" Blackclaw called again. "Is that you?"

There was no reply.

Crowpaw pressed her muzzle against the web and peered out. She had heard of Alexander many times, and was curious to see the rogue tom who had taken Goldenstar as his mate and given birth to Mothwing and Hawkfrost while staying with Riverclan. But in the half-light of the wooden nest, she could only just make out Alexander's tawny pelt huddled at the back of the cage the Twoleg had just brought in.

"Alexander, are you okay?" Blackclaw called more urgently.

"Give him time to recover," Cody advised. "The new ones are always quiet."

"I don't need time to recover," came a furious hiss. "How dare they put me in here? If I could get out, I'd rip that Twoleg to shreds!"

"What were you doing in the forest?" Blackclaw asked.

"I wanted to see my kits," Alexander replied. "I had heard about the Twolegs destroying the forest, and I wanted to make sure they were safe."

"I saw Mothwing not long ago!" Crowpaw mewed. "He was fine. He's going to be a medicine cat."

"Who's that speaking?" Alexander called.

"I'm Crowpaw, Thunderclan's apprentice medicine cat," Crowpaw

told him. "I'm friends with Mothwing."

"Do you know Hawkfrost too?" Alexander demanded. "Is she safe?"

Crowpaw did not answer. Her paws prickled as she pictured Alexander's other kit. She had an icy-blue gaze like the sky in leaf-bare, and her shoulders were as broad and powerful as those of a warrior of twice her age and experience. Last time Crowpaw had met her, she had threatened to drag Brackenfur back to the Riverclan camp because she had strayed across the border by mistake. Luckily, Mothwing had persuaded her to let Brackenfur go.

Blackclaw called from her cage, "Hawkfrost was fine when I saw her last."

"Thank goodness," Alexander breathed.

The relief in his voice surprised Crowpaw. "He sounds as worried as a Clan king would be!" she whispered to Cody through the web that separated them.

"Of course." Cody had been listening quietly to the exchange. "He's talking about his kits—he's a parent just like any other, after all."

"But he gave them away to be raised in Riverclan!" Crowpaw exclaimed, almost forgetting to keep her voice low.

"Why didn't he let his own Clan raise them?" Cody sounded puzzled.

"Alexander's not a Clan cat," Crowpaw explained. "He's a rogue."

"That's right, call me names just because I choose not to live among the rest of you," Alexander growled, overhearing. "Not that I care, as long as my kits are safe."

"I'm sorry," Cody apologized. "This is such a small nest it's hard not to get involved." He glanced sideways at the cage next to his where a tattered black rogue crouched without giving any sign that she had heard their conversation. "With some cats, at least," he added pointedly. Crowpaw knew that Cody had been trying to befriend the black she-cat but had not managed to get any answer from her except her name—Soot.

"You're a kittypet, aren't you?" Alexander asked Cody bluntly. "You sound too polite for a rogue, and you look too fat to be a Clan cat."

Crowpaw saw Cody bristle. "Cody's a friend!" she mewed, leaping to his defense.

"I didn't say he wasn't," Alexander meowed. "I'm just trying to work out who's who in this place."

Blackclaw explained: "They're mostly rogues, but there are a few other forest cats here." Gorsetail, Cloudtail, and Brightheart meowed greetings as Blackclaw went on, "Cody's the only kittypet, as far as we know."

"Have any of you worked out a way to escape from this foxhole?" Alexander asked.

"Not yet," Blackclaw admitted.

"Even Starclan hasn't given us a clue," Crowpaw added.

"Starclan!" In the shadows, she saw Alexander curl his lip. "Do you Clan cats still believe in that nonsense after what's happened to the forest?"

"Of course we do!" Crowpaw hissed.

"Well, say a prayer for me, little one," Alexander sighed unexpectedly. "I think we're all going to need as much help as we can get."

Sunhigh passed, and the tepid warmth of the afternoon sun began to fade.

"Here comes the Twoleg again," Cody called to the other cats.

Over the distant grumbling of the Twoleg monsters, Crowpaw heard footsteps outside and instinctively crouched at the back of her cage. The nest door opened and the Twoleg came in carrying the food pellets.

"There's no way you'll persuade that Twoleg to let us out of here by

purring at it," Crowpaw whispered to Cody as the Twoleg began opening the cages and putting in more food.

"I guess not," Cody shrugged. "But it won't hurt to make him trust me."

As he spoke a hiss exploded from the cage next to him. The Twoleg leaped backward from Soot's open door. Blood trickled down its forepaw as it stamped around the nest, spitting in rage. Crowpaw strained to see Soot through Cody's cage. She could just make out her shadowy outline as she flattened herself against the floor. The blood pulsed in her ears as she glanced over her shoulder at the Twoleg. It had stopped screeching and was staring menacingly at Soot. Suddenly, with a vicious cry, it thrust its paw back into the cage, and Crowpaw heard the she-cat screech in pain. Muttering, the Twoleg slammed the door shut.

Crowpaw shuddered. What had the Twoleg done?

When the Twoleg opened Cody's door and tipped pellets into his pot, the kittypet shied away. He was not purring at it now.

As soon as the Twoleg had gone, Crowpaw yowled, "Are you okay, Soot?"

A muffled groan came from the cage beyond Cody's. "That stinking Twoleg!"

Crowpaw sniffed the air and smelled the warm tang of blood.

"It looks bad," Cody whispered to Crowpaw. "There's blood on the floor of her cage."

"Where are you hurt?" Crowpaw asked Soot.

"I've cut my leg," replied the rogue. "That badger-pawed Twoleg shoved me against something sharp."

Crowpaw thought quickly. What did Cinderpelt use to stop bleeding? "Can any cat reach a cobweb?" she called. "Come on; we have to help her!"

"There's one near me," answered Gorsetail. "I think I can reach it. Hang on."

Peering down, Crowpaw saw Gorsetail's tawny paw reach out from a cage below her. A large cobweb stretched from the floor of the nest to the top of her cage. She reached toward it, squeezing her foreleg through the hole in the side of her cage. Finally she managed to plunge her paw into the thick tangle and drag it down. Twisting her foreleg around, Gorsetail held the cobweb as far up toward Crowpaw as she could.

Crowpaw flattened herself against the cage and pushed her paw through the shiny floor. It scraped against her fur but she clenched her teeth and forced her leg through a little more until she could take the wad of sticky cobweb from Gorsetail. She pulled it quickly into her cage and then began passing it to Cody. "Give her this!" she urged, squeezing the last pieces of cobweb through with her paws.

Cody nodded, unable to talk because he was holding a wad of cobweb in his mouth. As he dragged it into his cage, some of it stuck to the sides of the hole, wasting a few of the precious threads.

"Be careful!" Crowpaw gasped.

The voice of a rogue beneath them called anxiously up. "There's blood dripping through the top of my cage! That cat's badly hurt."

Crowpaw's heart beat faster. "Soot! Are you okay?"

"It won't stop bleeding," Soot replied, her voice trembling.

"Take the cobweb from Cody!" Crowpaw ordered. "Press it against the wound for as long as you can."

She heard Cody breathing hard as the kittypet passed the cobweb through to the next cage, followed by the sound of Soot's paws scrambling on the blood-soaked floor.

"Don't panic, Soot!" she mewed. "Just press the cobweb onto the wound."

"It's already soaked with blood!" Soot panted.

"That's okay," Crowpaw reassured her. "It'll still stop any more blood coming. Just hold it in place!"

She waited. Silence gripped the nest. Crowpaw's head began to spin, and she forced herself to take slow, deep breaths.

"Is she okay?" Cloudtail called after a while.

"The blood's stopped dripping on me!" reported the rogue from underneath Soot's cage.

"Soot?" Crowpaw called. "How is it?"

A ragged sigh came from Soot's cage. "That's better," she murmured. "It didn't even sting."

Crowpaw felt a rush of relief. "Keep the cobweb there for a bit longer," she told her. "Then you can give the cut a gentle lick to clean it. Not too fierce—you don't want it to start bleeding again."

"Well done, Crowpaw," Cody whispered from his cage.

Crowpaw blinked. For the first time since she had been captured, she didn't feel entirely helpless. Closing her eyes she sent a prayer of thanks to Starclan. She had never helped a rogue before, but she knew her warrior ancestors would approve. Loyalty to one Clan alone was no longer the way to survive.

She realized her belly was growling with hunger. She might as well follow Cody's advice and keep her strength up. Trying not to breathe in the horrible stench, she nibbled at a few of the foul pellets the Twoleg had left. *I suppose I should be grateful for the easy meal,* she thought as she forced herself to crunch the dry morsels.

"These are disgusting," she muttered.

"Not the best I've tasted," agreed Cody. "My housefolk tried to give me something similar once, but I soon let them know what I thought, and they never gave them to me again."

Crowpaw nearly choked with surprise. "You can make your Twolegs do what you want?"

"They're not so hard to train," Cody mewed. He sat up and began washing his paws.

Alexander called across the nest, "Can you train the mongrel that hurt Soot to be gentler?"

"I doubt it," Cody answered. "These workfolk are nothing like my housefolk."

Crowpaw saw Cloudtail's face appear behind the mesh of her cage. Her fur glowed in the dim light, illuminating the side of her face that had been terribly scarred by the dog attack many moons ago. "What do you think they're going to do with us?" she whispered.

"Perhaps they're going to turn us into kittypets?" Crowpaw suggested. Much as she disliked the idea, at least that might give them a chance to escape and return to the Clan.

There was a snort from Alexander's cage. "I don't think so," he rasped. "We're hardly the sort of fluffy, pampered cats that Twolegs go for."

Crowpaw glanced at Cody, hoping he wouldn't take offense, but to her surprise, the kittypet was nodding.

"Alexander's right," he agreed. "These folk don't care about cats—Clan, rogues, or kittypet. Trust me, I know the sort of—what do you call them? Twolegs?—that make good housefolk. They just want to get rid of us."

Crowpaw tried to swallow, but her mouth had suddenly become too dry, and the pellets she had eaten seemed to be lodged halfway down her throat. Trying not to bring them up again, she lapped a few mouthfuls of slimy water. She fought the urge to curl up in the back of her cage and lose herself in dreams. She could not rely on Starclan to get her out of this place. She had faith that her warrior ancestors were watching the destruction of the forest, but her instincts told her they were powerless against Twoleg cruelty; it was her own wits she would have to rely on now. She had to find a way to escape. She couldn't let Cody or her Clanmates down.

She remembered Gorsetail stretched his paw out of her cage to reach the cobweb. "Cody," she mewed. "You told me you tried reaching the catch that keeps the cage locked."

"Yes, but I couldn't get a grip on it," Cody confirmed.

"What about the rest of you?" Crowpaw called out to the other cats. "Can anyone undo their catch?"

"Mine's too stiff," replied Gorsetail.

"My web is ripped," Brightheart reported. "I can almost get two paws out, but I can't reach the catch."

"You're all wasting your time," Alexander growled. "Face it, there's no way out of here."

Outside, the noise of the Twoleg monsters rumbled on, making the nest shudder. Crowpaw couldn't believe there was no way out of the nest, whatever Alexander thought. If she gave up, there would be no hope left at all. As she listened to the Twolegs calling gruffly to one another in the growing dark outside, she reached through the web at the forest of her cage and began to claw at the catch that held it closed.

Chapter 6

The waning moon cast just enough light through the leafless branches to make the forest glow with eerie silver. Frost traced the outline of the dying ferns as Bramblepaw padded through the trees beside Squirrelflight.

"It'll be cold at Fourtrees," she fretted, hoping that her sister was warm, wherever she was.

"But at least it's clear," Squirrelflight answered in a low voice. "Silverpelt will be shining."

They were following Sandstar and Cinderpelt through the forest. The pace was slower than the two younger cats had been used to on their long journey, but Cinderpelt was still struggling to keep up. Cold and hunger had made his limp worse than usual.

"If there is a sign," Bramblepaw wondered out loud, "how long do you think it'll be before we go?" She wanted a chance to find her sister before the Clans left the forest.

"I don't know," Squirrelflight replied. "You saw what happened last night. Sandstar can't force the Clan to leave. He's bound by the warrior code as much as any cat, and even though he's our leader, he has to obey the will of the Clan."

Bramblepaw's belly tightened as she remembered the Clan's reaction. Beneath the stars, huddled against the icy wind that whipped the rock, Sandstar had told them the message she and Squirrelflight had brought back from Starclan. A shocked cry had rippled around the gathered cats.

"We can't leave the forest!" Lionheart had wailed. "We'll all die."

"We'll die if we stay!" Brackenfur had pointed out.

"But this is our home." Smallear's rasping mew had cracked as she'd

raised her voice.

At least Shrewpaw had sounded eager. "When are we going?" she'd asked.

But the memory of Hollykit's piteous mew made Bramblepaw's pelt prickle even now. "We don't have to go, do we?" the kit had cried.

"What if Ferncloud is right?" Bramblepaw hissed to Squirrelflight as they leaped over an abandoned foxhole, a yawning black mouth amid the shadows. "What he said in the den made sense—why should any cat follow the advice of a badger they'd never met?"

"But *Starclan* sent us to see Midnight," Squirrelflight argued. "What Midnight told us must be true."

Bramblepaw guessed he was trying to convince himself as much as her.

"We just have to hope that we see the sign at Fourtrees tonight," she said. "If Starclan has something to say to the Clan—to *any* of the Clans—it's not up to us to prove it." She trembled to think what Midnight had meant by 'a dying warrior,' but if the sign told them what to do next, they might still be able to save the Clans.

Their journey to Fourtrees took longer than usual, not just because of the slow pace but because they had to skirt the parts of the forest that the Twolegs had ruined, keeping low as they passed swath after swath of mud and felled trees. After a while, Bramblepaw stopped looking at the empty, ravaged spaces.

"How can any cat think this is still our home?" she murmured.

Squirrelflight just shook his head and padded after Sandstar toward the top of the slope that led down into Fourtrees.

For a moment, it felt like the start of every other Gathering Bramblepaw had attended, and when she closed her eyes she could almost hear the murmur of cats below, sharing tongues as the four Clans met in peace under the full moon. But there was no full moon, and this was not a Gathering. Her eyes snapped open, and she peered over the crest of the rise. As her eyes adjusted to the

dark, her breath caught in her throat. Even though Webfoot had warned them that the Twolegs had cut down the four great oak trees, Bramblepaw hadn't let herself imagine what it would look like. Not in nine lifetimes could she have imagined anything as terrible as what she saw now.

The four giant oaks that had once guarded the Great Rock had completely disappeared; even their stumps had been torn from the ground. Their trunks lay in pieces, neatly sliced by giant claws. Bramblepaw could smell the bitter sap that seeped like blood from each mutilated piece of wood.

The heart of the forest—and the roots of life for the four Clans—had been ripped out. Nothing would ever be the same again.

Bramblepaw wondered how their warrior ancestors could bear to look down from Silverpelt at the ruined clearing. "Webfoot told us they had destroyed Fourtrees, but I didn't think..." Her voice trailed away as her father looked at her, sympathy in his eyes.

"Come on," he hissed, leading them down the slope.

As she picked her way over the sliced trees, sticky sap clung to Bramblepaw's fur, and tree dust wafted up to sting her eyes and tickle her throat. Blinking, she scanned the clearing, then stared in disbelief. "The Great Rock is gone!"

Squirrelflight stopped dead and followed her gaze. "How could that happen?" he gasped. He bounded over to peer into the huge hole that gaped where the rock had once stood.

"I-I thought it had roots like a tree," Bramblepaw murmured dazedly, looking down into the hole. "I thought they reached down so far that nothing could ever move it."

"Over here!" Sandstar called from the side of the clearing.

He and Cinderpelt were standing almost belly-deep in the mud beside a vast gray stone. It looked clumsy and awkward, and the shape was unfamiliar—after a few moments, Bramblepaw realized it was upside down—but it was definitely the Great Rock.

Squirrelflight thrashed his tail. "Twolegs did this!" he spat. "They must have used their monsters to move it."

In the cold, unfeeling moonlight, Bramblepaw could see gouge marks scarring the rock where the monster's talons had scratched it. This was worse than losing every single tree in the forest; every cat knew that trees were living things that grew old and died just like they did, but the Great Rock had been there for moons upon moons before the cats came, and should have lasted for uncountable moons more.

A harsh voice rang out across the clearing. "There will be no more Gatherings now." Bramblepaw recognized Blackstar's meow, and shadowy movements on the logs around them told her what the scent of the sap had disguised—that the other cats were here already. Remembering Mousefur's dire warnings of an ambush, she looked closely in the half-light and spotted, with a twinge of relief, Rowanclaw, Leafpaw, and Brookleap among them.

"Rowanclaw!" Squirrelflight ran over to welcome his sister. Bramblepaw heard a disapproving growl rumble in Sandstar's throat, and her paws pricked with frustration. How could he question their loyalty when he knew they were only working together to save the Clans?

Each cat had brought their leader and medicine cat. But Bramblepaw felt a jolt of surprise when she saw that two other cats had joined them: Brightsky, the elderly Riverclan medicine cat, had brought his apprentice Mothwing, and Mothwing's sister, Hawkfrost, had come too. Bramblepaw recognized them from Crowpaw's descriptions. The dark brown tabby she-cat wasn't looking at the Great Rock but was watching the other cats, her ice-blue eyes expressionless in the moonlight.

"It cannot be true!" Brightsky hissed, staring at the Great Rock. Every hair on his pelt stood on end, and his tail quivered like a near-dead mouse. Mothwing tried to calm him with rapid licks on his shoulder, but he did not stop shaking. Cinderpelt picked his way awkwardly across the logs, his injured leg barely touched the ground, and pressed his body against his.

Bramblepaw followed her father as he joined the other cats at the bottom of the Great Rock. She glanced at Leafpaw, Brookleap, and Rowanclaw, desperate to know how their Clans had received them, but they stood silently beside their leaders.

"How will we climb it now?" Tallstar asked, her voice trembling as she stared up at the sheer rock face towering above them. Even half-hidden in shadow, the black and white Windclan leader looked so frail that Bramblepaw was surprised she had managed the journey here at all.

"These marks will give us a grip," Leopardstar said, stretching his forepaws up the smooth rock to where the monsters' talons had scraped long wounds into the hard stone.

He pushed his hind paws into the mud and scrambled upward. Blackstar clawed his way after him to the top of the rock. She looked strong and determined, but her dull white pelt hung from her bony frame as she climbed. Tallstar watched them, her thin frame seeming smaller than ever.

"I'll follow you," Sandstar offered.

Tallstar nodded and scrambled up toward the lowest gouge mark, clinging to the slippery rock with her claws. Sandstar sprang after her, propping the Windclan leader with his shoulder to stop her sliding back down again.

"Shouldn't we climb the Great Rock too, to see Midnight's dying warrior?" Bramblepaw whispered as the leaders disappeared over the top and the medicine cats went around to the other side.

"I don't think it matters who sees it," Squirrelflight answered, but his eyes were clouded with worry.

"He didn't say it had to be us," Brookleap chipped in. "He just said 'stand on the Great Rock.'"

"At least we have a chance to talk now," Rowanclaw murmured. "Blackstar says she is ready to leave the forest."

Bramblepaw blinked. "Really? That's great!" She wished her own

homecoming had been so straightforward. "Sandstar hasn't decided yet."

Rowanclaw flicked her ears. "To be honest, I think Blackstar had already decided to go, even before I came back with Midnight's warning."

"But what did she say when you told her? Did she believe you?" Bramblepaw demanded.

The dark ginger tabby warrior didn't reply.

Squirrelflight pressed closer to his sister. "Did they give you a hard time?"

Rowanclaw shook her head. "They acted like I was a stranger." Sadness glimmered in her eyes. "Tallpoppy's kits were frightened of me."

"It wasn't easy for us either," Bramblepaw mewed. "It's as if we're not part of the Clan any more."

"Of course we're part of the Clan," Squirrelflight reassured her. "It'll just take a while for things to get back to normal."

Brookleap snorted. "Nothing's ever going to get back to normal!" he spat. "I've seen what the Twolegs have done to Windclan and Thunderclan territory, and I can imagine it's the same in Shadowclan." He glanced at Rowanclaw, and she nodded grimly. "Even though they haven't reached Riverclan territory yet, everything's changed," Brookleap went on, lashing his tail. "Blackclaw's gone missing, and Hawkfrost is deputy now."

"Blackclaw's missing?" Bramblepaw gasped.

"Was she taken by Twolegs?" asked Squirrelflight.

Brookleap looked puzzled. "Why would Twolegs take her?"

"They took Crowpaw!" Bramblepaw told him. "We know what happened because Brackenfur was there, although she got away."

"Gorsetail's missing too," Leafpaw mewed, his gaze flicking from one cat to another.

"No Shadowclan cats have been taken, but I'd guess it's only a matter of time," Rowanclaw mewed. "And meanwhile the Twolegs have invaded so much of our territory that we've starving. There's hardly any prey left, and leaf-bare's only just begun."

Squirrelflight sat down carefully on the muddy ground. "Whether it's Midnight's message or starvation that drives the Clans out, I don't see any way we can stay in the forest."

"But the Twolegs haven't touched Riverclan territory," Brookleap reminded him. "And Hawkfrost thinks they never will. She pretty much called me a traitor for being concerned about the other Clans, and she said I should never have gone on the journey." His amber eyes glistened with sadness. "She said Feathertail would still be alive if I hadn't let him get caught up in other Clans' problems."

"It wasn't the journey that killed Feathertail. It was staying with the Tribe so long," hissed Leafpaw.

Brookleap flinched and looked down at his paws.

"We had to help them!" Bramblepaw stared at Leafpaw, puzzled. She had found him arrogant and impatient at the start of the journey, but he had become much easier to be around as they traveled, and by the end of their adventure she would have considered him one of her closest friends. Now he was as prickly as ever. Did their journey, the importance of the message they all had to take to their Clans, mean nothing to him?

"Leafpaw?" Squirrelflight meowed. "What did Windclan say when you told them?"

"They accepted Midnight's words without question," he muttered. "It's our last hope of survival." His voice was flat and dull, like stone. "I didn't think the Clan could be suffering any more than when I left, but it is. There's nothing left to eat on the moors at all. A bird if we're lucky. Sometimes a mouse, just one to feed the whole Clan. Windclan kits have *never* gone hungry like this before."

"So Tallstar wants to leave?"

Leafpaw lifted his eyes and met Squirrelflight's gaze. "Oh, yes," he agreed. "She wants the Clan to go as soon as we can. Her greatest fear"—he broke off and swallowed—"her greatest fear is that we're not strong enough to make it."

"Oh, Leafpaw!" Bramblepaw exclaimed, immediately forgiving his harsh words to Brookleap. "I'm so sorry."

"We don't need your pity," growled the Windclan apprentice. "I will fight with all the strength I have to make sure my Clan survives." He glared at her, his eyes cold.

Bramblepaw felt a surge of anger rise in her belly. "What are you talking about? You're acting as if you're the only one who can save your Clan! Don't you remember that we're in this together? Or have you forgotten there were six of us on that journey?"

"Bramblepaw!" Squirrelflight stopped her with a flick of his tail. "We mustn't fight now."

Bramblepaw grumpily fell silent. Leafpaw looked away, but he flexed his claws, tearing at the cold earth.

Rowanclaw gazed up at the rock. There was no sign of their leaders. They were hidden behind the brow of the rock's towering summit. "Everything would be easier if we knew where we were meant to be going," she mewed. "Do you think the sign will come?"

"Perhaps we're too late," murmured Brookleap. "We spent a long time in the mountains." He glanced at Leafpaw. "Believe me, I wish we hadn't stayed."

"We *all* agreed at the time," Squirrelflight reminded him.

Leafpaw stared at his paws without saying anything.

There was a yowl from above them, and Sandstar's call rang around the hollow. "We should wait a while longer!"

"Why? What's the point?" growled Blackstar. Her bony frame

appeared, silhouetted against the stars, on the edge of the rock. "We have wasted our time coming here. There will be no sign tonight. And do we really need one to tell us that the forest is being destroyed? Just look around you!"

Bramblepaw and the others back away as the Shadowclan leader bounded down the rock and landed in the mud beside them. Leopardstar followed her.

"But it's not even moonhigh!" Sandstar protested, peering down from the top of the rock.

Leopardstar looked up at him. "Even if Starclan does send a sign about leaving the forest, it's no concern of Riverclan's," he meowed.

However frustrated she was by Leopardstar's selfishness, Bramblepaw could understand why he wasn't as troubled as the other leaders. His glossy coat proved that him and his Clanmates were as well fed as ever, and their sleep wasn't disturbed by fear of monsters snarling and munching their way into the camp.

"Hunger will soon make him change his mind," Leafpaw hissed.

"But surely you want to see what Starclan thinks we should do?" Sandstar argued.

"It's too cold to wait any longer," meowed Blackstar. "My fur is thinner than I'd like these days—and that's not a sign from Starclan. It's the fault of those fox-hearted Twolegs stealing my Clan's prey."

"You can't leave yet!" Sandstar yowled as the Shadowclan leader clambered away over the logs.

"There'll be no sign here tonight," Blackstar called over her shoulder. "Look at this place! It's ruined."

"Starclan will not desert us!" Sandstar leaped down from the rock and scrambled awkwardly over the logs to the Shadowclan leader.

Blackstar faced him, her pelt bristling. "I did not say Starclan has deserted us! But my Clan would rather rely on their leader's judgment than on the muddled rumors of some inexperienced

warriors and a *badger*."

"But Starclan is going to show us the way!" Tallstar slithered over the edge of the Great Rock, half scrambling, half falling down its side. Leafpaw leaped forward, reaching up with his forepaws to soften her landing. Tallstar hit the mud clumsily but staggered to her paws, shaking Leafpaw off. "They will know where we can find new territories, far away from these dangers," she insisted.

"We are perfectly capable of finding a new home for ourselves." There was a chilling certainty in Blackstar's words.

"You have somewhere in mind already, don't you?" Cinderpelt looked up from where he crouched beside Brightsky.

"We are going to live in Twolegplace where Bloodclan used to rule," she announced. "I still have one of their former warriors among my elders. She will show us the best places to find food and shelter. Now Scourge is dead, we'll be the strongest cats there."

"You can't do that!" Sandstar protested. "That will leave only three Clans in the forest!"

"Soon there won't *be* a forest," Blackstar pointed out grimly. "Only the bodies of dead cats. This is one battle in which I cannot see how it would help us to join with other Clans. It's not a matter of fighting an enemy, but of finding enough prey to feed the mouths we already have. I'm sorry, but we go alone."

She turned to leave, but Sandstar stood in her way. Blackstar curled her lip to reveal sharp teeth.

"We can't let them fight!" Bramblepaw hissed to Squirrelflight.

"I know," he agreed. He leaped over the logs to Sandstar's side. "Sandstar, you have to persuade Shadowclan to come with us! That's what Starclan wants. If there isn't a sign, like Midnight said, then we should go back to the sun-drown-place and ask him if he knows where we should go."

"You want us to go to a strange place just because you think Starclan sent *you* there?" Leopardstar snarled. "Since when do you

make decisions for all the Clans?" His gaze swept over Bramblepaw, Rowanclaw, and Brookleap. "In fact, why should we trust any of you? You are all part Thunderclan!"

Rowanclaw unsheathed her claws. "Are you questioning my loyalty to my Clan?"

"My brother died on the journey to fetch this message!" Brookleap hissed.

Bramblepaw wondered if Starclan was watching them and thinking that these quarrelsome Clans didn't *deserve* to be saved.

"Stop!" rasped a feeble voice, and Tallstar padded unevenly over. "If we fight, the sign will never come!"

"How many times do I have to tell you? We don't need a sign," growled Blackstar. "Shadowclan is going to leave the forest, and we already know where to go."

Sandstar didn't argue with her. Instead, he turned to Leopardstar. "What do you plan to do?"

"Riverclan has no need to travel to some distant place on the word of a few dreaming warriors," Leopardstar replied. "The river is still full of fish. It would be stupid for us to leave. The other Clans' troubles are not ours to worry about."

"But if our troubles are not yours as well, why was Feathertail sent by Starclan with the other cats?" Cinderpelt challenged quietly.

"Only Feathertail can answer that, and he is dead," Leopardstar retorted.

Hawkfrost climbed up beside her leader. "If you can't survive in the forest anymore, then I agree that you should leave," she meowed, her gaze flicking around the cats to include Tallstar. "After all, what sort of leader would let his Clan starve?"

Bramblepaw was rather taken aback by the bold way she addressed the other Clan leaders. After all, she wasn't much older than her.

Squirrelflight glared at Hawkfrost. "You just want us to leave so you can steal our territory!"

"If you aren't here, then you won't need it anymore."

Squirrelflight bristled. "You might feel differently if you were truly Clanborn."

"Show some respect, Squirrelflight!" Sandstar snapped. "Hawkfrost is not responsible for her birth."

Squirrelflight opened his mouth, ready to argue, then seemed to think better of it and looked down at his paws. Bramblepaw thought she saw Hawkfrost's whiskers twitch with satisfaction and felt a surge of anger on Squirrelflight's behalf. How dare she gloat?

"This is getting nowhere," Tallstar meowed fretfully.

"The four Clans must remain together," Sandstar insisted. "We have lived beneath Silverpelt for as long as any cat remembers. We share the same ancestors. How could Starclan watch over us if we are separated?" But Blackstar had jumped down from the tree trunk and was padding away, signaling to Littlecloud, the Shadowclan medicine cat, to join her.

Rowanclaw looked uneasily at her friends. "I have to go," she whispered to Bramblepaw.

"What about the sign?" Bramblepaw reminded her. She shivered, and not just from the cold. Where was the sign that was supposed to save them?

Doubt flickered in the Shadowclan warrior's gaze. "I'm sorry; I can't wait." She hurried after Blackstar and Littlecloud. The hollow felt even emptier and more exposed without the three Shadowclan cats.

"Good luck, Sandstar," Leopardstar meowed. He looked over to where Mothwing was crouched beside Brightsky. "Is he well enough to travel?"

"Of course I am!" Brightsky rasped, struggling to his paws. "I made it here, didn't I?"

"Then some," Leopardstar ordered, and, turning away, he led his cats from the clearing.

Brookleap brushed against Bramblepaw's pelt as he passed. "I'll try to speak to you and Squirrelflight soon," he whispered.

"What can we do without the sign?" Bramblepaw hissed frantically.

Brookleap flashed her a look of despair. "I don't know," he said. He gazed back at the Great Rock, dragged from its ancient seat. "Perhaps Starclan has no power here anymore."

Bramblepaw stared at him in horror. Could that be true?

Sandstar watched the Riverclan cats leave. "I cannot persuade them." He sighed.

"Then we two must go alone," Tallstar wheezed. She sat down to catch her breath. "Sandstar," she croaked, "I must find new territory for my Clan before the next full moon. We are starving." Bramblepaw felt her heart twist with pity as she went on. "But we are too weak to make the journey alone. Travel with us, Sandstar. Help us like you did when you brought Windclan back from exile, after Brokenstar drove us out."

Sandstar miserably twitched his ears. "We can't leave without the other two Clans. There have always been four Clans in the forest, and wherever we end up, four Clans must be there as well. How else can we be sure the fifth Clan will come with us?"

The fifth Clan? Bramblepaw wondered what her father meant. She glanced at Squirrelflight, but he looked as puzzled as she felt.

"Starclan will be with us always," Tallstar argued, and Bramblepaw understood; Starclan was the fifth Clan.

She saw a glimmer of anger enter the Windclan leader's tired eyes. "You are too proud, Sandstar," she warned. "I can tell Thunderclan is on the brink of starvation just like Windclan. If you insist on staying in the forest while you wait for the other two to make up their minds, your Clanmates will die."

Sandstar looked away. "I'm sorry, Tallstar," he meowed. "I want to help you, but my heart tells me that Thunderclan cannot leave until all the other Clans agree to leave as well. We will have to keep trying to persuade them."

Tallstar thrashed her tail. "Very well," she hissed. "We cannot travel without you, and so we will wait. I don't blame you for the hunger we suffer, but I'm disappointed you will not help us now." She padded away with Barkface close beside her, ready to support her if the Windclan leader stumbled on paws that seemed strong enough to carry her to the edge of the clearing, let alone all the way back to the moor.

Bramblepaw turned to Squirrelflight. "Why wasn't there a sign?" she protested.

Squirrelflight gazed at her. "Do you think Midnight was wrong?" His wide eyes reflected the moon. "After all, did she really tell us anything we can't see from what is happening around us?" He gestured with his tail to the ravaged clearing, to the swaths of fallen trees around them. "Every cat *knows* the forest is being destroyed by Twolegs. Perhaps Blackstar is right, and each Clan should just try to save itself, without waiting for any more signs."

Bramblepaw fought to control the panic that fluttered in her chest. "You can't mean that! We have to believe that Midnight was right!" she argued. "Starclan sent us to speak with him, and that must mean Starclan wants us to save the Clans."

"But what if we can't?" Squirrelflight murmured.

Bramblepaw stared at him in dismay, her mind suddenly filled with an image of falling trees, roaring monsters, and blood spilling down Sunningrocks into the river. "Don't give up, Squirrelflight!" she whispered. "We didn't make that journey and lose Feathertail for nothing. We *have* to save the Clans!"

Chapter 7

Bramblepaw curled up beside Shrewpaw and tried not to think about the warm, moss-lined den where the apprentices had slept before. At least the small gully they were lying in gave some shelter from the chilly night breeze. It felt strange to be sleeping apart from Squirrelflight after their long journey together, but at least Shrewpaw seemed happy to have her back. Her paws ached with tiredness, and she closed her eyes, folding her tail over her muzzle for comfort. At first she couldn't stop thinking about the disastrous meeting at Fourtrees, but gradually dreams wove into her waking thoughts and drew her into sleep.

She was alone among the trees, and she could smell prey-scent. A cold wind breathed through the forest. Bramblepaw lifted her nose and tasted the air. A fat mouse was snuffling among the leaves. It was the plumpest piece of prey she had found since returning to the forest, and she swiped her tongue hungrily over her lips. Squirrelflight would be pleased to have a share of this fresh-kill.

Crouching, Bramblepaw crept silently toward the unsuspecting creature. It had its head half-buried under an oak leaf and hadn't noticed her. This was going to be an easy catch. Suddenly, rapid pawsteps sounded behind her. Terrified, the mouse darted out from under the oak leaf and scuttled away beneath the roots of a tree. Bramblepaw spun around, bristling with fury.

A tortoiseshell cat with gentle amber eyes was standing behind her. "Hello, Bramblepaw," he mewed. "I have something to show you."

"You've just ruined the best catch I'm likely to get all day!" Bramblepaw snapped back. She had never seen this cat before, though he carried the scent of Thunderclan. She stopped and put her head to one side. "Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm Spottedleaf."

Bramblepaw blinked. She had heard all about the long-dead Thunderclan medicine cat. Why would Spottedleaf come to her?

She stepped forward to touch the tom's nose in greeting, but as she went closer, the image faded.

Bewildered, Bramblepaw stared into the trees. She pricked her ears, listening for movement, but heard nothing and turned to resume her hunt. The scent of prey that hung in the air was too tempting. Perhaps Spottedleaf had wanted only to greet her, nothing more.

Bramblepaw prowled deeper into the woods, following a path that led toward Snakerocks. But as she crept through the undergrowth, the forest seemed to change, and she didn't recognize the trees around her. Surely she should have reached Snakerocks by now. Had she taken the wrong path? She quickened her pace until she was racing through trees she had never seen before.

A tiny voice in her mind reminded her that it was just a dream, and she wasn't really lost. She blinked, trying to wake up. But when she opened her eyes, she was still trapped in the strange woods, and her alarm grew until her heart pounded like a woodpecker's beak on bark. She ran on, hoping to find a landmark she recognized, but the forest grew darker and more silent, as if the trees themselves were watching her. There didn't seem to be anything else alive in these woods—no sound of prey, no scent of her Clanmates or any other Clan.

"Spottedleaf!" she called. "Help me!"

There was no reply.

The trees grew more thickly here, and the shadows between the trunks swallowed her until she could hardly see where she was putting her paws.

"Don't be frightened."

The soft voice seemed to echo from every direction at once, and Bramblepaw spun around, trying to find where it came from. There was a faint scent of Thunderclan, and then she saw Spottedleaf's

pale pelt glowing among the trees like the distant moon in a mottled sky.

"I'm lost, Spottedleaf!" she called.

"No, you're not," Spottedleaf reassured her gently. "Follow me."

Panting with relief, Bramblepaw wound her way through the tree trunks. As she approached, the shadows seemed to draw away and the forest grew lighter, although there wasn't any moon that she could see.

"Follow me," Spottedleaf murmured. He turned and headed into the trees, running as confidently as if he were following an invisible path. Bramblepaw pelted after him.

Spottedleaf ran like the wind, but Bramblepaw raced over the ground until she felt as though she were swooping through the trees like a bird. Exhilaration flooded her so that she hardly noticed the forest become familiar once more. Then she recognized the Great Sycamore, reaching high into the sky. And here were the Snakerocks, a tumbled heap of round, sandy boulders where snakes basked in greenleaf, but which offered good prey in colder weather. Spottedleaf leaped up to the top of the rocks, then down the other side and on through the forest. Bramblepaw scrambled after him quickly.

They went until Bramblepaw detected the tang of the Thunderpath. Suddenly, without warning, Spottedleaf stopped. Bramblepaw skidded to a halt, nearly bumping into him, and followed the medicine cat's gaze. Ahead of them, every single tree had been stripped away, and the forest floor was churned into mud right to the edge of the Thunderpath. Wooden Twoleg nests ringed the clearing, and monsters sat hunched and silent nearby.

"This way," Spottedleaf mewed. He led Bramblepaw across the slippery, rutted earth toward the nests.

"It's so quiet," Bramblepaw whispered. Oddly, she felt soothed by the eerie quiet, and she followed Spottedleaf over the open ground without fear.

Spottedleaf stopped beside one of the wooden nests, and Bramblepaw looked up at it in surprise. "What is this place?" she mewed. "Why have you brought me here?"

Spottedleaf twitched his tortoiseshell tail. "Look through the hole," he urged. "Look at the cages."

Cages? The word sounded strange to Bramblepaw's ears. She noticed a small gap in the wall, about a fox-length up. She stretched her forepaws up the side of the nest, her belly brushing the scratchy wood, and peered in.

Rows of dens made of cold-looking shiny web were stacked along the walls. Those must be the "cages." Bramblepaw could see a dark, soft-edged shape huddled in each cage. *Cats!* Her heart raced as scents flooded her nose—Riverclan, Windclan, rogue. She stood breathlessly through the hole, and then she smelled the warm scent of Thunderclan. With a jolt of recognition she saw her sister curled up in one of the cages near the roof of the wooden nest.

"Crowpaw!" She gasped. She clawed herself upward, thrusting with her hind legs, trying to clamber through the hole.

"You can't get in, Bramblepaw." Spottedleaf stood on his hind legs to reach up beside her, "This is only a dream," he murmured. "But when you wake, Crowpaw will still be here."

"Will I be able to rescue her?"

"I hope so," Spottedleaf answered softly.

"But how?" Bramblepaw yowled, jumping down to the ground.

"Stop fidgeting, for Starclan's sake!" Shrewpaw muttered.

Bramblepaw's eyes shot open. She was lying in the narrow cleft in Sunningrocks. The hollow was dark, and she could only just make out the soft shapes of sleeping cats around her. She sat up and stared over the lip of the gully. Outside, frost glittered on the smooth stone, and beyond that she saw the outlines of leafless trees, black and spiky against the sky.

"What's the matter?" Shrewpaw asked sleepily.

"I know where Crowpaw is!" Bramblepaw whispered. "I have to go and rescue her."

Shrewpaw's eyes blinked open. "How do you know?"

"Spottedleaf told me in a dream!"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure!" Bramblepaw snapped.

Shrewpaw twitched her ears. "You can't just disappear without telling any cat where you're going," she warned. She didn't add, *Again*, but Bramblepaw guessed that was what she was thinking.

"I could wake Sandstar up," she mewed. "Now I know where Crowpaw is, he could send out a rescue party."

"Not in the middle of the night," Shrewpaw pointed out. "It's too cold. Besides, it was just a dream."

"It was more than a dream," Bramblepaw insisted.

"But you're not a medicine cat," Shrewpaw argued. "No cat's going to go on a rescue mission in the middle of the night because you had a dream." Her amber eyes were gentle. "They might listen to you in the morning, though. Settle down and go back to sleep."

Bramblepaw sighed, but she knew she was right. She slumped back down again, still seeing the wooden nest filled with cages.

Shrewpaw lay down beside her and rested her tail comfortingly on her flank. "We'll find her in the morning," she promised, closing her eyes.

Her breathing slowed as she drifted into sleep, but Bramblepaw stayed awake, gazing up at the narrow strip of Silverpelt she could see through the mouth of the gully. A cat from Starclan had visited her to tell her where Crowpaw was! She knew Spottedleaf had had a special bond with her father when he first came to the forest.

Could it be that he wanted to help Sandstar's daughters because he still loved him?

Bramblepaw opened her eyes and sat up with a start. Bright light streamed into the gully, though the air was cold, colder still because all the other apprentices had left. Quickly, she stretched and scrambled out of the crevice. Her dream was still clear in her mind. She had to tell her father so he could organize a rescue party.

Shrewpaw was washing on the stone slope in front of the den.

"Where's Sandstar?" Bramblepaw demanded.

"He's out patrolling with Silverstream," Shrewpaw replied, rubbing at her cheek with her paw.

She twitched her tail in frustration. "Why didn't you wake me?"

"You didn't sleep well, remember?" meowed Shrewpaw. "I thought you could get some extra rest and join me on a later patrol. Sandstar agreed."

"Didn't you tell him about my dream?" Bramblepaw pricked her ears. "What did he say? When is he sending out a patrol?"

"I-I didn't mention the dream," Shrewpaw stammered. "I thought you would have forgotten it. It was only a dream, after all."

Bramblepaw glared at Shrewpaw. "It was a message from Starclan!"

"I'm really sorry." She shuffled her paws and stared at the ground.

Bramblepaw let her fur lie flat again. "No, *I'm* sorry," she sighed. "It's not your fault I overslept."

"It's okay." Shrewpaw shrugged. "Did you really see Crowpaw in your dream?"

Bramblepaw nodded. "And the other cats that are missing from the forest. Or at least, I definitely smelled Windclan and Riverclan scents."

"That's amazing!" She glanced past her and twitched her whiskers. "Looks like there's been some successful hunting already today. That should put Sandstar in a good mood, at least."

Bramblepaw turned to see Squirrelflight padding up the slope with a vole in his jaws. He carried it over to where Dustpelt lay in the sunshine watching her kits play. She accepted Squirrelflight's offering with only a blink of her amber eyes, as if she didn't have the strength to thank him. Bramblepaw noticed with a prick of unease how small Dustpelt's kits were. They looked hardly old enough to leave the nursery, let alone journey all the way to the sun-drown-place. By leafbare, kits were usually strong and healthy, ready to face the cruelest season. If Bramblepaw and Squirrelflight succeeded in persuading the Clan to leave the forest, how many cats would never see their new home?

She shook her head. Right now, she didn't want to go anywhere without rescuing Crowpaw.

"Squirrelflight!" She bounded down the slope toward him. "I know where Crowpaw is! Starclan came to me in a dream! The Twolegs have trapped her in a little nest, past Snakerocks. We have to go and rescue her."

Squirrelflight pricked his ears. "Really?" He scanned Sunningrocks. "Have you told Sandstar? Is he organizing a rescue party?"

Bramblepaw shook her head. "He's on patrol. But if you came with me, we could rescue her together."

Squirrelflight blinked. "Are you mad? Rescue her from a Twoleg nest? We wouldn't stand a chance on our own."

Bramblepaw's paws pricked with frustration. "But Starclan must want us to rescue her *now*!" she argued. "Why hasn't Spottedleaf come before? Crowpaw must be in more danger than ever."

"Let's wait till Sandstar gets back. He'll know what to do."

Bramblepaw couldn't believe her ears. "Does that mean you won't help me?"

"It means I won't let you go on such a dangerous mission!" Squirrelflight snapped.

Bramblepaw wanted to rake his ears in frustration. "You're afraid!"

Squirrelflight bristled. "What if we tried to rescue Crowpaw and got caught ourselves?" he pointed out. "Who else knows the way through the mountains? Who would lead Thunderclan to their new home?"

"You weren't like this when we were traveling! You agreed to go back and rescue Brookleap!"

Frustration flashed in his eyes. "Yes, and look what happened to Feathertail when we did!"

"But this is my sister!" Bramblepaw thrashed her tail. "Why won't you understand?"

Squirrelflight blinked. "I'm only asking you to wait till Sandstar gets back—"

"But you won't help me now!" Bramblepaw couldn't keep the desperation out of her voice.

Squirrelflight's gaze softened. "Let's wait till Sandstar returns. He'll send out a patrol. We'd need more warriors..."

Bramblepaw couldn't bear to listen anymore. "I didn't think that you of all cats would let me down," she spat, stalking away into the trees.

As she reached the undergrowth, the sound of rushing pawsteps made her stop and look around. She hoped it was Squirrelflight coming after her to tell her he had changed his mind, but it was Brackenfur.

"I heard what you were saying!" she panted. "If Starclan has told you where Crowpaw is, they must want us to rescue her as soon as possible!"

"That's what I thought," Bramblepaw growled. "But Squirrelflight

won't help me."

"I will," Brackenfur offered. Grief shadowed her face. "I couldn't stop the Twolegs from taking Crowpaw, but I'd do anything to help her now."

"Do you mean it?" Bramblepaw tried to ignore the twinge of jealousy that pricked her belly—why shouldn't Crowpaw have made friends with another cat while she was away?

"Of course!"

"Come on, then!" she yowled. "Let's go!"

She pelted into the forest, wanting to get away before any of the senior warriors spotted her and ordered her to join a hunting patrol, or even worse, overheard them and told Sandstar what she was planning. She heard Brackenfur pounding after her. The two cats raced past the ravine without even looking down into the abandoned camp, and headed for the Great Sycamore. The monsters were still there, chewing up more and more of the forest. If they weren't careful, they'd tumble right into the ravine and smash themselves to bits on Highstones, Bramblepaw thought hopefully.

"Keep low," she warned as the roaring grew louder, but Brackenfur was already ducking down to follow her through the dying bracken.

"Thank Silverpelt they've left us some trees to hide in!" she hissed.

They scrambled over Snakerocks. Bramblepaw was determined to follow the exact trail Spottedleaf had shown her in her dream, but she hoped that the weak sun hadn't tempted any snakes out to bask. Safely over the rocks, they headed back into the trees toward the Thunderpath.

The hateful stench of the Twoleg monsters stung her nose a heartbeat before she heard them roaring up ahead. By the time she reached the edge of the muddy clearing she was breathing hard, her paws trembling. Fear gripped her from ear-tips to tail.

Brackenfur skidded to a halt beside her and peered out from under a thick bramble bush. "What are we going to do now?"

"I'm not sure," Bramblepaw admitted. The clearing was busy with Twolegs shouting and monsters churning up the ground as they prowled back and forth. It looked nothing like her dream, even though she was sure they had come to the right place. There was no trace of the stillness and the silence she had padded confidently through with Spottedleaf. But the noise and activity made her paws prick with determination. Starclan had brought her here knowing full well how dangerous it would be. They must have faith in her.

"Crowpaw's over there." She gestured with her tail to the wooden nest Spottedleaf had led her to. There was a monster crouched outside the door, grumbling quietly to itself. It was much smaller than the tree-munching monsters, and its round black paws seemed half-sunk in the mud.

"Look," Bramblepaw hissed suddenly. "They've left the door open!"

She froze as a Twoleg emerged from the nest, carrying a cage. Inside crouched a mangy tabby, its eyes wide with terror. The Twoleg pushed it into the belly of the waiting monster, then went back inside the wooden nest and came out with another cage.

Bramblepaw stared in horror at the bundle of fur hunched inside the cage. "Crowpaw!" Without stopping to think, she dashed out of the trees.

Crowpaw must have spotted her, because as the Twoleg pushed her cage into the monster's belly, she yowled, "Bramblepaw, get away from here!"

Her shriek startled the Twoleg, and it turned around sharply, spotting Bramblepaw at once. With eyes sparkling in triumph, it put down Crowpaw's cage and ran toward her. Bramblepaw scrambled to a halt, her paws slipping as she tried to bolt back to the safety of the trees. The Twoleg chased her with its forepaws outstretched, its long legs gaining on her as she fought to get a clawhold on the slimy mud. *Starclan! Help me!*

Just when her heart was about to burst with fear, Brackenfur exploded from the bushes with a vicious snarl. She rushed at the Twoleg, raking her claws across its grasping paws until it howled in

pain. Then she grasped Bramblepaw's scruff in her teeth and hauled her toward the trees. Bramblepaw found her footing with a gasp, and Brackenfur released her. Together the two cats sped into the woods. When they reached the safety of the brambles, Bramblepaw skidded to a standstill.

"Keep running!" Brackenfur hissed. "They won't give up that easily." She nudged Bramblepaw hard, pushing her further into the clump of brambles.

Bramblepaw stumbled as the thorns scraped her fur. "What about Crowpaw?"

"Do you want to join her?" Brackenfur spat. "Keep running!"

Too terrified to think straight, Bramblepaw obeyed and raced after the warrior into the trees.

Only when they had run all the way to Snakerocks did Brackenfur slow down, her flanks heaving. Bramblepaw stood beside her, too shocked to speak.

"What in Starclan's name is going on?" Silverstream's deep meow echoed off the rocks as he emerged from the bracken with Blossomfall and Rainwhisker close behind him. The Thunderclan deputy stared at the two trembling cats. "What's wrong with you? You look like you've just seen Goldenstar's ghost!"

"It's Crowpaw!" Bramblepaw cried. "We found her, but the Twolegs are putting her inside a monster's belly. They're going to take her away; I know they are!"

Silverstream narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth to speak, then stopped and glanced at the bushes behind him. "Squirrelflight?" he called. "Is that you?"

"Yes." The branches quivered and Squirrelflight stepped out. "I'm looking for Bramblepaw." He blinked when he spotted her standing beside Brackenfur. "Are you okay?"

"I found Crowpaw!" Bramblepaw hissed. "The Twolegs are going to take her away! We have to rescue her *now*, or I'll never find her

again."

Silverstream glanced at Squirrelflight, then at Rainwhisker and Blossomfall. The Thunderclan warriors stood with their chins raised high and flexed their powerful shoulders.

"We can't let the Twolegs take our cats if there is anything we can do to stop them," growled Rainwhisker.

"We should not give up without a fight," Blossomfall agreed. Their meaning was clear. This was still their forest. They may not have been able to protect it against all the Twolegs and their monsters, but this was one battle they could take on.

Silverstream narrowed his blue eyes at Bramblepaw. "Very well," he meowed. "Show us where she is."

"This way," she panted. She leaped back over Snakerocks, Brackenfur close behind. Silverstream, Blossomfall, Rainwhisker, and Squirrelflight followed. Hearing their pawsteps, Bramblepaw felt a surge of confidence. With five Thunderclan warriors at her side, she must be able to rescue her sister!

When they reached the bramble thicket at the edge of the trees, Silverstream hissed for the cats to stop. "Stay low!" he commanded.

To Bramblepaw's relief, the small monster was still waiting outside the wooden nest, and the Twoleg was carrying out more cages to stow in its belly. "Crowpaw's already inside," she whispered.

"Right," muttered Silverstream. "Blossomfall, you and I will attack the Twoleg. We've got to keep him distracted while Brackenfur, Squirrelflight, and Rainwhisker let the other cats out."

"What about me?" Bramblepaw asked.

"You stay here as a lookout," Silverstream ordered curtly. "Tell us if more Twolegs come."

Bramblepaw stared at him in shock. "But—" she began, but Silverstream ignored her.

"Most of them must be in the monster by now," he went on. "Squirrelflight and Brackenfur, I want you to climb inside and start getting the cats out. Rainwhisker, you go into the nest and help any that are left."

Bramblepaw glared at Silverstream. "I'm getting my sister out of that monster!"

The silver tabby deputy stared back at her for a long moment, and Bramblepaw felt as if she'd forgotten how to breathe. "Very well," Silverstream agreed at last. "But if anything goes wrong, get back to the trees as fast as you can."

Bramblepaw nodded. When she glanced at Squirrelflight, his eyes were shadowed with worry. *I faced greater danger than this on the journey to the sun-drown-place!* she wanted to tell him. *Stop treating me like a kit!*

"Right," Silverstream meowed, turning back to watch the monster. "The Twoleg is going to fetch another. We'll be ready to take it by surprise when it comes out."

He dashed from the trees, keeping low as he raced over the mud. Blossomfall, Brackenfur, Rainwhisker, and Squirrelflight ducked out from under the brambles and ran across the churned earth behind him. Bramblepaw scrambled after them, feeling the mud suck at her paws and cling to the fur on her belly.

A few tail-lengths from the open door, Silverstream hissed, "Wait!" and the cats halted in the sticky mud.

The Twoleg stepped out of the wooden nest. It was carrying another cage and did not see the six cats waiting in ambush.

"Now!" Silverstream screeched, and he leaped at the Twoleg.

When he sank his claws into its hind leg, the Twoleg dropped the cage. The cage cracked open with a sound like a splintering branch. Bramblepaw stared in astonishment as she recognized the smoky-black pelt inside. It was Blackclaw! The Riverclan warrior leaped out and hurled herself at the Twoleg's other leg, hissing in rage.

Blossomfall joined the attack, gripping the Twoleg as though he were clawing his way up a tree. The Twoleg bellowed in agony and hopped around with a cat clinging to each leg.

"Come on, Bramblepaw!" Squirrelflight yowled. He jumped into the open belly of the monster, Brackenfur close behind him. Bramblepaw heard the blood roaring in her ears as she watched Rainwhisker slip into the nest. She hoped there wasn't another Twoleg waiting inside. Taking a deep breath, she hauled herself up into the monster with Squirrelflight and Brackenfur.

Rows of cages were lined up in the gloom. The fear-scent was overpowering, and for a moment Bramblepaw froze. How in Starclan's name were they going to rescue all these cats? Then she saw Crowpaw, pressed against the mesh of her cage.

"Bramblepaw! Over here!" she wailed.

"I'm coming!" Bramblepaw streaked over to her and used her teeth to tug at the catch on the front of the cage. "It's loosening!" she hissed as the catch began to tear away like the wing of a pigeon. She pulled as hard as she could until the cage sprang open and sent Bramblepaw toppling onto the floor of the monster's belly.

Crowpaw leaped down and quickly rubbed her muzzle against her sister's. "It's really you!" she breathed.

"Spottedleaf told me where you were!" Bramblepaw gasped, scrambling to her paws.

Crowpaw blinked, then shook herself. "Tell me everything later. Come on; we've got to get all these cats out!" She raced to the nearest cage and began pulling at the catch.

Bramblepaw turned to another and struggled until she thought she'd be spitting out broken teeth, but the catch eventually came free, and a matted rogue she-cat leaped out. Without a word she fled from the monster and sprinted toward the woods.

"You're welcome," Bramblepaw muttered before starting on the next cage.

Unfamiliar cats leaped around her as Squirrelflight, Brackenfur, and Crowpaw worked on the cages one after another. The cages mostly contained rogues who were gone as soon as their doors were open. Then Bramblepaw felt a cat push her aside, heading deeper into the monster's belly, and saw Blackclaw barging past. The Riverclan warrior made straight for the cage at the end.

"Alexander!" Blackclaw yowled, and she began scraping at the catch with her claws.

"This way works better," Bramblepaw told her, nudging her out of the way to use her teeth. Instantly the catch opened and Alexander sprang out.

"Get out of here!" Blackclaw urged.

Alexander hesitated, looking at the cages that were still closed.

"We'll deal with these!" Blackclaw promised.

Alexander's fur was standing on end, and his blue eyes were huge with fear. He was shaking so much that he wouldn't be able to open the cages even if he tried. At last he nodded and leaped from the monster.

Only a few cages still held cats. Crowpaw scanned the inside of the monster and called to Bramblepaw, "Brightheart and Cloudtail are still in the hut! Go and help free them; I've got to let Cody out."

"Who's Cody?" Bramblepaw asked.

"I'll tell you later! Quick! Get Cloudtail and Brightheart!"

Bramblepaw leaped out of the monster's belly and raced toward the wooden nest. Her heart lurched when she saw that another Twoleg had arrived to help. Blossomfall finally lost his grip on the first Twoleg. The Thunderclan warrior landed heavily in the mud, but he scrambled to his paws and raced back to rejoin Silverstream in the attack.

As Bramblepaw dashed into the nest, she was almost knocked flying by a brown tabby rogue running out. She swerved quickly out of

the way as the scraggy she-cat hurtled past her; then she scanned the nest, searching for Brightheart and Cloudtail.

Brightheart was already free. He was helping Rainwhisker scrape at Cloudtail's catch. "We can't open it!" Brightheart yowled, his voice rising in panic.

"Try your teeth," called Bramblepaw.

Brightheart bit down hard, and Bramblepaw saw him tremble with effort as he pulled, but still it would not open. More Twoleg voices sounded outside, and Silverstream raced into the nest.

"There are too many Twolegs!" he yowled. "We have to get out of here!" He pushed Bramblepaw toward the doorway. "Get back to the trees!"

"But Cloudtail is still trapped!"

"I'll take care of her!" Silverstream promised, pushing Bramblepaw with his nose. "Just get out of here!"

He leaped over to where Rainwhisker and Brightheart were still tugging at Cloudtail's catch and shoved them out of the way. "Get to the trees!" he spat. "Now!"

Brightheart didn't move, but stood stiff-legged, staring in horror at Cloudtail's cage. Her panic-stricken face was pressed against the mesh.

"Come on!" Rainwhisker hissed at him and bundled the white and ginger warrior toward the door. Bramblepaw glanced over her shoulder at Silverstream as he grabbed the stiff catch in his powerful jaws, then followed the others out of the nest.

As she emerged a Twoleg lunged for her, but she spun around and bolted along the side of the nest. There were Twolegs everywhere, howling in rage. She spotted Brightheart and Rainwhisker making for the trees and pelted after them, thrusting her way into the tangle of brambles. Rainwhisker kept running into the forest, but Brightheart skidded to a halt and turned back to watch what was happening outside the nest. Bramblepaw crouched beside him and

peered across the clearing. Crowpaw and a tabby she didn't recognize were running toward them.

"Hurry!" she screeched. A Twoleg was gaining on them, his huge paws taking giant strides across the mud. As Bramblepaw watched, willing the cats to outrun the Twoleg, the white pelt of Cloudtail caught her eye in the doorway of the nest. Silverstream had opened her cage!

The Thunderclan she-cat hurtled toward the trees, the scars on her face half-hidden by splatters of mud. She brushed past the Twoleg that was chasing Crowpaw, unbalancing him in the slippery mud so that he fell over with a roar.

Crowpaw and the tabby reached the safety of the bushes and scrambled in among the thorns.

"I can't believe you saved us!" panted the tabby.

Bramblepaw was already rubbing her nose along Crowpaw's cheek, breathing in her familiar scent. "I'm sorry we were nearly too late," she whispered.

"I thought I'd never seen you again!" Crowpaw was panting hard. "Where's Squirrelflight?"

Bramblepaw felt a jolt of alarm and scented the air. She smelled the fresh fear scent of Blossomfall and Brackenfur. Then she recognized a clump of dark ginger fur snagged on a bramble thorn, the blood still wet where it had been torn from his pelt. She trembled with relief. If Squirrelflight had gotten this far, he must have escaped.

"He's okay," she mewed. "Did Blackclaw get out?"

"Once the last cat was free she started heading for the trees," Crowpaw told her.

"Then everyone escaped!" Bramblepaw breathed in relief.

As she spoke, Cloudtail crashed into the brambles, her eyes huge with terror. "Silverstream!" she gasped.

"Where is he?" Bramblepaw demanded.

Brightheart nearly bowled Cloudtail over as he leaped toward her. "I shouldn't have left you!" he cried, licking her all over her ravaged face.

"Where's Silverstream?" Bramblepaw repeated.

"Twolegs!" panted Cloudtail, pulling away from Brightheart.

Bramblepaw's heart jumped into her throat. "What do you mean?"

"One of them grabbed him!"

Bramblepaw peered out from the undergrowth. A Twoleg was closing the belly of the monster. Hissing and spitting at the other Twolegs, who were staring wildly around the clearing, it climbed into the front. The monster roared into life and, spraying mud from beneath each of its fat black paws, began to pull away. Then Bramblepaw saw something that made her stomach flip over. A lone face peered from inside the monster, a face she had known since she was a kit. It gazed desperately at the trees as the monster picked up speed and raced away.

"Silverstream!" Bramblepaw gasped.

Chapter 8

Crowpaw watched the monster pull away and opened her mouth to howl, but no sound came out. The forest spun around her and she blinked, fighting the urge to lie down and never get up again.

Twolegs began to run toward the trees, shouting and waving their paws.

They were not safe yet.

Squirrelflight exploded from the undergrowth behind them. "Quick! Run!" He raced to Bramblepaw's side and gave her a shove.

Bramblepaw dragged her horrified gaze from the clearing and stared at Squirrelflight. "What about Silverstream?"

"There's nothing we can do for him right now," he hissed. "Hurry! We have to get out of here!"

"Which way?" Cody yowled, staring into the trees.

"Follow me," Squirrelflight ordered.

Crowpaw hadn't seen Squirrelflight since he left the forest with Bramblepaw. This was a very different cat that had returned—an experienced, confident warrior, calmly issuing commands in spite of the huge danger they were all in. This wasn't the time to find out exactly where they had been for the last moon. Pulling her paws free from the mud, she scrambled through the undergrowth behind Bramblepaw and Cody. Brightheart passed her, with Cloudtail so close to him that their fur touched.

Relief flooded through Crowpaw when she saw the familiar pelts of Brackenfur and Rainwhisker flash through the trees up ahead. Blackclaw was with them. All the trapped cats had been freed—but they had lost Silverstream.

She heard the Twolegs crashing through the forest behind them.

Glancing over her shoulder, she watched them blunder through the bushes, swerving clumsily around the trees and stumbling over trailing brambles. Crowpaw knew they would not catch her now. This was her domain; she could race through it as fast as any creature, her lithe body perfectly suited to slipping through the undergrowth like the wind.

The cats scrambled down Snakerocks. The Twolegs were far behind now, and Crowpaw slowed her pace. Cody fell in beside her as they padded breathlessly into the leaf-strewn glade beside the Great Sycamore. The other cats were sprawled on the ground, exhausted. Brightheart was licking Cloudtail's ears as if he would never get them clean. Blackclaw watched them, her smoky-black flanks heaving.

Cody looked nervously around the clearing. "Is it safe here?"

"The Twolegs won't catch us now," Crowpaw assured him.

"But what about foxes and badgers?" Cody's eyes were huge. "Aren't the woods full of all kinds of dreadful things?"

"Like wildcats?" Crowpaw joked weakly. She collapsed onto the soft leaves next to the other Thunderclan cats.

Rainwhisker struggled to sit up. Her day gray fur stood on end, and there was blood oozing between the claws on one of her front paws. "Are you sure they got Silverstream?"

Bramblepaw flattened her ears. "The monster carried him away. I saw him!"

"But he was fighting like a Tigerclan cat!" Blossomfall protested. "They couldn't have caught him!"

"There were too many Twolegs," Bramblepaw explained.

Blackclaw dipped her head toward Bramblepaw. "I owe him my life," she murmured. "I thought we would never escape." She stared intently at her. "You saved us."

Bramblepaw sat up. "It wasn't just me," she insisted. "We all risked

our lives. Silverstream led the way."

Crowpaw narrowed her eyes and studied her sister. That was the reply of a warrior, not an apprentice. She noticed how much leaner and stronger Bramblepaw had become—much fitter than the scrawny Thunderclan warriors. Crowpaw bent her head to lick her own patchy, unkempt fur. For the first time, she felt awkward around her sister, unsure what to say when so much had happened since they had last seen each other.

"What will the Twolegs do to him?" Brackenfur wailed, grief-stricken.

Crowpaw wished she could offer comfort, but she didn't know what to say. If it hadn't been for her brave Clanmates, she would be making that journey instead of Silverstream.

"May Starclan help him," murmured Blossomfall.

"Starclan is helpless against the Twolegs," Bramblepaw spat.

"Starclan was with us today," Crowpaw reminded her. "They gave you the strength to face the Twolegs. They will look after Silverstream."

Brackenfur hauled herself to her paws and touched Crowpaw's muzzle with hers. "Thank Starclan the Twolegs didn't take you as well," she murmured. "Bramblepaw saw you in a dream, trapped in that place. She insisted we rescue you."

"It wasn't just me you saved," Crowpaw meowed, looking gratefully at her Clanmates.

"You saved all of us," Cody agreed, padding over to Crowpaw's side.

Brackenfur pulled away from Crowpaw and looked sharply at the kittypet. "Who are you?" she demanded. "You're not a forest cat, but you don't look like a rogue, either."

"This is Cody," Crowpaw meowed. "He stopped me from feeling sorry for myself, and made me believe we might be able to escape."

Brackenfur sniffed. "You're a kittypet?"

Rainwhisker sat up and stared at the tabby tom. Blossomfall flattened his ears.

"Yes, I'm a kittypet," Cody confirmed.

Squirrelflight got to his paws and padded over to Cody. Crowpaw saw her friend try not to flinch away from the broad-shouldered warrior, whose coat was streaked with mud and blood. "Do you want us to show you the way back to Twolegplace?" he offered.

"It's not safe enough to go that way yet," Crowpaw warned. "The Twolegs might be searching the woods."

Cloudtail sat up and stared nervously around the glade.

"It's okay," Brightheart reassured her. "We can outrun them from here."

"We'll be even safer back at the camp," mewed Bramblepaw. "Why doesn't Cody come with us for now?"

The kittypet stared uncertainly at the cats. For all his courage when they were trapped, he was obviously feeling daunted by being around so many of the wildcats he had heard about in bloodthirsty stories.

"You'll be made welcome," Crowpaw meowed. She looked at Squirrelflight and Rainwhisker, hoping she was right.

"Sandstar won't turn away a cat who's in trouble," Squirrelflight agreed.

"Won't your Twolegs be missing you?" Brackenfur asked pointedly, and Crowpaw glanced at her in surprise.

"Yes, of course." Cody kneaded the ground with his paws. Some of the fire returned to his blue eyes. "But it sounds as if it wouldn't be safe for me to travel through that part of the forest alone, and I don't want to put any more of you in danger."

"We'll get you home as soon as it's safe," Crowpaw promised.

"I suppose we should be going then," Brackenfur sighed. She looked at Squirrelflight. "What are we going to tell Sandstar about Silverstream?"

Crowpaw swallowed. Silverstream was the Thunderclan deputy, one of the bravest and most experienced warriors, and Sandstar's best friend. How would the Clan cope without him?

The cats fell into a miserable silence as they trekked through the forest. Crowpaw noticed that Blossomfall seemed to be leading them toward Sunningrocks rather than the ravine. Why weren't they going to the camp? She glanced at Bramblepaw, puzzled.

"The Clan had to abandon the old camp," her sister explained. "The Twolegs were getting too close."

Crowpaw gulped. "Has it gotten that bad?"

"I'm afraid so," Blossomfall answered grimly.

"Surely there's not enough shelter for all of us at Sunningrocks?" Brightheart meowed.

"How are the kits?" Cloudtail asked anxiously.

"Not as well fed as they should be," Bramblepaw admitted.

"We should leave before they get any weaker," Squirrelflight muttered.

Crowpaw wondered what he meant, and felt even more confused when Blossomfall flashed him a sharp glance. Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw had only just returned to the forest—why were they talking about leaving already?

"Are we nearly there?" Cody called from behind.

Crowpaw could hear the murmuring of the river through the leafless trees. They were nearing the Riverclan border, and Sunningrocks was not far ahead. "Yes, it's not far now," she called

back.

Blossomfall padded onward, and Crowpaw followed with the others through a swath of bracken. They emerged at the top of the slope that led down to the Riverclan border. Crowpaw could see water rippling at the bottom. It was unexpectedly comforting to find that the river was still there in spite of everything the Twolegs had done to the rest of the forest.

Blackclaw padded down to the river. At the water's edge she stopped and called back to the Thunderclan cats, "I honor the warriors of Thunderclan for rescuing me. And I mourn the loss of Silverstream with you." Her orange eyes clouded for a moment; then she turned and pushed through the swirling water with powerfully churning paws till she reached the other side.

The Thunderclan cats headed for Sunningrocks. Crowpaw quickened her pace, impatient to be back with her Clan and anxious to know what had happened to their old home in the ravine. Cody matched her step for step, sticking close to her side; Crowpaw could tell by the flicking of his ears that the kittypet was both excited and nervous about meeting the Clan.

"Are you sure they won't mind my coming back with you?" he whispered.

Crowpaw hardly heard him. She had just spotted Sandstar sitting near the top of the broad gray slope. The sun lit up his sandy pelt, picking out his bony frame. He looked thin and tired, and his eyes were half-closed. How could she tell him that Silverstream had been lost in rescuing her? The thought pierced Crowpaw's heart like a thorn.

The breeze must have carried her scent, for Sandstar suddenly turned and stared down the rock. He jumped to his paws and raced down to them with his tail held high. "Crowpaw," he panted, sliding to a halt. "You're safe!" He licked her ears, and a purr throbbed in his throat.

"I missed you so much," Crowpaw mewed, pushing her face into the familiar warmth of his pelt.

"Thank Starclan I have both of you back." Sandstar's mew was thick with emotion.

Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw waited at the bottom of the slope with the other Thunderclan warriors, while Cody hung back among the trees.

Brightheart and Cloudtail shot past them onto Sunningrocks, calling for their kit. "Birchpaw!" Brightheart called. "We're back!"

The light brown tabby apprentice was dozing in a sheltered dip in the rock. At the sound of voices, she raised her head and leaped to her paws. "You escaped!" she cried, hurtling down the slope to greet her mother and father. She skidded into them, purring with delight. Brightheart wrapped his tail around her, while Cloudtail licked her so fiercely that Birchpaw ducked out of the way with a muffled squeak.

Fireheart came racing out from an overhang at the side of Sunningrocks. She bounded down the slope and nudged Sandstar out of the way. "Crowpaw! Did they hurt you?"

"No," Crowpaw answered as Fireheart enthusiastically began to lick away the stench of Twoleg nest from her daughter's pelt. "I'm fine, honestly."

"How did you escape?" Sandstar demanded.

"Bramblepaw rescued us" Crowpaw delightedly fought to keep her balance against her mother's eager grooming.

"I had a dream last night." Bramblepaw stepped forward. "Spottedleaf told me where Crowpaw was trapped."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Sandstar stared in amazement at his daughter.

"You were away on patrol," Bramblepaw explained. "It couldn't wait. So Brackenfur and I found Crowpaw by ourselves—"

"And there wasn't time to come all the way back to camp for help," Brackenfur broke in. "The Twolegs were already starting to take all

the cats they'd caught away from the forest."

"We couldn't rescue them by ourselves," Bramblepaw chipped in. "But we found Silverstream and Squirrelflight near Snakerocks."

"And Blossomfall and Rainwhisker," added Squirrelflight. "But it was Silverstream who led the rescue. He assessed the danger and decided it was worth trying to save all the cats the Twolegs had trapped."

"Silverstream," Sandstar murmured. "I might have known he'd try something foolish." He looked around for his old friend. "Where is he?"

Crowpaw felt the rock sway under her paws. Fireheart stopped washing her, as though she sensed something was wrong.

Sandstar looked at her with his head to one side. "Why didn't he come back with you?"

Crowpaw saw him read her expression. His face suddenly seemed to be cast in shadow. "The Twolegs caught him," she forced herself to say, the words dropping like stones in the cold air.

"They trapped him inside a monster and took him away," Bramblepaw explained hoarsely.

"Silverstream's gone?" Sandstar whispered. He sat down, drawing his tail around him. Crowpaw's legs trembled. Her father had never seemed so far away, so far beyond her reach to comfort him.

"W-we should have gotten a bigger patrol together before we attacked," Squirrelflight stammered, staring grief-stricken at his leader. "I should have stopped him. I'm sorry."

Sandstar stared at the dark ginger tom in front of him. A fire seemed to burn in his eyes, and, for a moment, Crowpaw was afraid that her father was going to take out his pain on the young warrior. Beside her, Bramblepaw unsheathed her claws—would she really defend Squirrelflight against their father? Crowpaw wondered—but Squirrelflight met his leader's gaze without flinching.

"You have brought back my daughter, and Brightheart and Cloudtail." Sandstar almost seemed to be persuading himself that he could not blame Squirrelflight for what had happened. "Silverstream will find his way back to us."

"But they trapped him in a monster," Rainwhisker murmured.

Sandstar stared at the dark gray warrior, hollow-eyed. "He will return," he repeated. "I have to believe that or everything will be lost."

Fireheart moved closer to Sandstar and pressed her cheek against his shoulder. But Sandstar just turned away and walked slowly toward the shadowy overhang. Suddenly he looked old beyond his years.

Fireheart padded after him. "We have both our daughters back." Her voice drifted over the rock. "That is a miracle we never thought would happen."

Sandstar gazed at her. "Silverstream would have sacrificed himself for them in an instant," he admitted.

"That is why he will always be a good friend," Fireheart murmured. She sat beside Sandstar and curled her tail around him.

"Crowpaw!" Cody hissed from the shadow of the trees. "Is everything okay?"

Crowpaw could not answer. She was still staring at her father with a pang of sorrow so great she could hardly breathe. She felt her sister's tail sweep gently down her flank.

"Don't worry," Bramblepaw murmured. "Sandstar will be alright, so long as he believes Silverstream will return."

"But they trapped him in a monster," Rainwhisker repeated, as if she would never get the image out of her head.

Mousefur looked grim. "Sandstar will have to choose another deputy before moonhigh," she meowed.

Bramblepaw's eyes flashed with rage, and she rounded on Mousefur, making Crowpaw jump. "You're acting like Silverstream is dead!" she cried. "He's not dead! You heard what Sandstar said. He *will* come back. We must not give up hope."

Chapter 9 (TW: Animal Death)

A mournful yowl echoed around the rocky cleft, jolting Crowpaw awake. For a moment she thought she was back in the cage, and that her terrifying escape had been nothing but a dream. Then she smelled the scent of the forest and the river on the icy breeze, and remembered she was at Sunningrocks, in the new Thunderclan camp. She blinked open her eyes and looked over the edge of the hollow, her breath billowing like smoke in the freezing air.

"What is it?" Cody whispered. The kittypet had slept beside her in the apprentices' gully last night. Crowpaw felt his soft fur bristling against her flank.

"It sounded like Dustpelt," she mewed. "But I can only see Ferncloud from here."

The pale gray flecked warrior stood on the frost-covered slope, silhouetted by the early morning light. A kit dangled limply from his jaws.

As Ferncloud carried the kit away, Dustpelt cried out again from the hollow that formed the camp's makeshift nursery.

Crowpaw scrambled out, struggling to get a grip on the icy stone, and raced to Dustpelt's side. "What's happened?"

"Hollykit is dead!" Dustpelt whispered. "Ferncloud's gone to bury him." She tucked her remaining kit close to her belly. "I woke up and he was cold. So cold!" Her voice cracked with grief. "I licked him and licked him and he would not wake up."

Crowpaw felt sorrow grip her heart. What kind of medicine cat was she if she hadn't even noticed Hollykit was so close to death?

"Oh, Dustpelt," she breathed. "I'm so sorry."

One by one, the Clan gathered above the nursery in grim silence. Cody stood among them, his eyes round with sympathy. To Crowpaw's relief, her Clanmates took no notice of the kittypet. They shared a common enemy now—the Twolegs who were trapping cats and tearing up the forest.

Cinderpelt scrambled down into the hollow. "Fetch some poppy seeds," he ordered. "Dustpelt must not waste what little energy she had left on grieving."

Crowpaw hurried to the crack in the rock where Cinderpelt stored his tiny heap of remedies and reached in to pull out a leaf-wrapped hoard of poppy seeds. She wished with all her heart they were still in the ravine, where the medicine cats had kept their den in the rock well stocked. Looking at the shriveled leaf beneath her paw, she guessed there were only two or three doses of poppy seeds left, and there was no hope of finding more with leaf-bare nearly upon them.

Sandstar's call startled her. "Crowpaw!" She turned to see her father bounding up the slope with Squirrelflight and Mousefur. "How is Dustpelt?" he asked.

"Cinderpelt told me to get some poppy seeds to calm her," Crowpaw told him.

"I didn't think it would get this bad so soon!" Sandstar growled. "Oh, Starclan! What can I do to help these cats?" He raised his eyes to Silverpelt, fading quickly in the dawn light.

"Last night was so cold," Mousefur remarked. "The poor little mite didn't have enough flesh on his bones to make it through."

"Whitekit survived," Crowpaw reminded them. "We must do everything we can to make sure Dustpelt can feed him properly."

"But the nights are only going to get colder, and once the snow comes..." Sandstar trailed off and stared into the treetops beyond Sunningrocks.

Squirrelflight glanced uneasily at Crowpaw. "If we are to leave the

forest we should go soon," he meowed. "Before snowfall makes the mountains too difficult to cross."

Crowpaw narrowed her eyes. She had been torn by doubts since her sister had told her about Midnight's warning. She could tell that many of her Clanmates couldn't believe that Starclan really intended them to go, but she trusted that her sister and Squirrelflight had a role to play in their Clan's destiny. She did not want to leave her forest home, and she feared the Clan were not strong enough for such a journey, but how could she ignore the will of Starclan?

"You already know how I feel. We cannot go without the other Clans," Sandstar pointed out. Crowpaw silently agreed with him. However much hardship one Clan was in, they had to remain together for Starclan's sake.

"I must take these to Dustpelt," she murmured, picking up the bundle of seeds.

As she reached the crevice, Brackenfur was padding away, her eyes dull with sorrow. She didn't even look up as she went past. Crowpaw noticed that she trod carefully on the freezing stone as if it hurt her paws. She scrambled into the hollow and dropped the poppy seeds at Cinderpelt's paws. Dustpelt was lying with her eyes wide, staring at nothing. Whitekit was huddled beside her, too shocked and hungry to mew. To Crowpaw's surprise, Cody was there too.

"Thank you," Cinderpelt whispered, taking the leaf bundle and carefully unwrapping it with his teeth.

"Shouldn't you be outside?" Crowpaw gently prompted Cody.

"I thought I might be able to help," came the reply. "I lost a litter once."

"A whole litter? That's so sad!"

"They didn't die," Cody explained quickly. "My housefolk sent them away to new homes. But I felt the loss as badly."

"And these are the Twolegs you want to go back to?" Crowpaw mewed in disbelief. "How could you possibly forgive them?"

"It is normal for kittypets not to raise their kits. We don't expect anything else." Cody blinked. "My housefolk are gentle and kind. They chose good homes for each kit. They wouldn't have known that I miss them."

Cinderpelt silenced them with a warning stare. Dustpelt had grown fretful again, writhing on the cold stone and letting out tiny moaning sounds. "Hollykit is with Starclan now," Cinderpelt whispered to her. "He will never know cold or hunger again."

"I tried my best," Dustpelt wailed. "Why couldn't I have died instead of him?"

Sandstar's deep mew sounded from the rim of the hollow. "Because then there would be no cat left to look after Whitekit. You must have courage, Dustpelt."

Crowpaw looked up. Cody flattened his ears. He had not met the Thunderclan leader yet.

"Dustpelt, I'm so sorry about Hollykit," Sandstar went on. "We will make sure Whitekit survives."

Dustpelt stared up at him. "Whitekit *must* survive," she hissed.

Cinderpelt placed a poppy seed on the ground beside her. "Here," he mewed. "Eat this; it will help soothe your pain."

Dustpelt looked uncertainly at the seed.

Cody stretched forward and sniffed the black speck. "Eat it," he advised, pushing it nearer to Dustpelt with his paw. "You need to save all your strength for the kit you have left."

Sandstar watched him curiously. "Fireheart told me Crowpaw had brought a kittypet back with her. Is that you?"

"Yes. I'm Cody. Come, Dustpelt, eat the poppy seed."

"You can see that the Clan cannot offer you much as a place of safety," Sandstar apologized. "But it's even more dangerous for you to travel alone. When I have a free warrior, you'll be escorted home. Until then, you can stay with us."

"Thank you," Cody murmured.

Sandstar's gaze flicked back to Dustpelt. "Will she be all right?"

"She just needs rest," Cinderpelt told him.

"And Whitekit?"

"He always was the strongest of the three." Cinderpelt bent down to lick the small scrap of fur that had begun to knead his mother's belly in search of milk.

"Do your best." Sandstar turned and padded away.

Cody's shoulders drooped. "It's hard to believe your father was ever a kittypet," he muttered to Crowpaw.

"I never really think about it," she admitted. "It's not as if I knew him back then. I was born after he became leader." She looked at Cody. "Will you be alright, staying here?"

"Of course." Cody sounded surprised that Crowpaw should have any doubts. Sweeping his tail gently along Crowpaw's flank, he turned and crouched down beside Dustpelt. "You two go," he meowed to Crowpaw and Cinderpelt. "You have many cats to look after. There is little I can do for the rest of the Clan, but at least I can take care of Dustpelt."

Cinderpelt looked uncertainly at the kittypet, but Cody reassured him. "I'll make sure she eats the seed," he promised. "And while she sleeps I can look after Whitekit. He'll be missing his brother."

"Very well," Cinderpelt agreed. "But call me if Dustpelt becomes more distressed."

Cody nodded, and Crowpaw followed Cinderpelt out of the den, glancing back just once to blink appreciatively at her friend.

The Clan was huddled in small groups on the exposed flank of the rock, their faces grave. Crowpaw suddenly longed to run through the woods on her own. The Clan she had returned to seemed filled with more suffering than she could ease, and she wanted to be away from it, if only for a short while.

She padded down the slope toward the trees. Pushing through the undergrowth she inhaled the earthy odors of the forest, drinking them in gratefully. She detected the familiar smells of Bramblepaw and Squirrelflight, and when she put her head to one side to listen she heard their voices mewing urgently up ahead. Weaving through the bracken, she found them in a small clearing near the Riverclan border.

"I told Sandstar we'd have to leave soon," Squirrelflight was meowing. "We shouldn't try to cross the mountains after the snow comes, and we'll never make it to newleaf if we stay here."

"But how do we know we should go through the mountains?" Bramblepaw argued. "The sign never appeared when we were at the Great Rock. A warrior was meant to show us the way, but no warrior came!"

"With no sign, how do we know we're meant to go at all?" Squirrelflight muttered. "Perhaps Midnight was wrong."

"How could he be wrong?" Bramblepaw mewed. "Starclan sent us to him!"

Crowpaw froze, her tail quivering. She closed her eyes, wishing for some sign that Starclan was listening, and then opened them again impatiently. Why was she being so feeble? If Starclan had a sign they would send it. Until then, they would have to figure this out by themselves.

"Bramblepaw?" she called. "Squirrelflight, it's me." She pushed through the bracken to join her Clanmates. The pair sprang away from each other and faced her warily.

Squirrelflight shifted his paws. "Did you hear what we were talking about?"

"Yes."

"What do you think?" He stared at her. "Could Midnight have been wrong?"

Part of Crowpaw *wanted* Midnight to be wrong. She wanted to stay in the forest where she had been born. This was Starclan's home, too. But why else would they have ordered Squirrelflight and the others to make such a dangerous journey? They would not have risked the cats' lives for nothing. "Is it Starclan you doubt or yourselves?" she murmured.

Squirrelflight wearily shook his head. "The journey was difficult enough. We didn't think things would be even harder once we returned. We were so sure Starclan would show us the way, but they haven't, and we can't afford to wait. Taking the Clan away from their home is such a big responsibility..."

"And we don't know when we should leave or where we should go," Bramblepaw put in.

"In the end, it has to be Sandstar's decision," Crowpaw reminded them. "You can only tell him what you have seen and heard."

Squirrelflight nodded.

"How did you get to be so wise?" Bramblepaw asked her sister fondly.

"How did you become so brave and noble?" Crowpaw teased, flicking Bramblepaw's flank with her tail. She felt a surge of happiness at being with her sister again. Then she remembered Dustpelt and Silverstream, and her heart sank.

"If Sandstar does decide to leave," she breathed, "what about Silverstream?"

Bramblepaw looked sad. "Silverstream will find us, wherever we are."

"I hope so," Crowpaw mewed. "But until he does, who'll be the deputy?"

"Silverstream is still our deputy," Squirrelflight meowed.

"But he's not here, and the Clan needs strong leadership more now than ever," Crowpaw argued.

"Sandstar can't appoint a new deputy as long as he believes Silverstream is still alive," Squirrelflight insisted.

Crowpaw shook her head. She couldn't agree with him, but she admired his loyalty.

"Let's not argue about it," Bramblepaw pleaded. "There's already too much to worry about." She glanced at Crowpaw. "There's something I wish I'd asked Silverstream to explain before we lost him."

Crowpaw tipped her head on one side. "What?"

"It just seemed strange at the time, and Sandstar silenced him before he could explain..."

Squirrelflight pricked his ears as she went on.

"When we first returned, Silverstream welcomed us by saying, 'Fire and tiger have returned.'" Bramblepaw blinked. "It just seemed like an odd thing to say."

Crowpaw looked at her paws, unsure what to say. Should she tell Bramblepaw and Squirrelflight about Cinderpelt's ominous warning? Or would they be better off without that hanging over their heads? After all, they had enough to worry about already.

"You know something, don't you?" Bramblepaw prompted.

Crowpaw shuffled her paws, feeling a flash of frustration that she could never hide anything from her sister. "Cinderpelt had a message from Starclan."

Squirrelflight leaned forward. "I thought Starclan had been silent?"

"It was just before you left," Crowpaw explained. "Starclan warned him that fire and tiger would destroy the Clan."

"Fire and tiger?" Bramblepaw echoed. "What's that got to do with us?"

Crowpaw twitched an ear. "You look like a tiger." She turned to Squirrelflight. "And you look like a flame."

Bramblepaw's eyes widened. "So we're fire and tiger?"

Crowpaw nodded.

"But how could anyone believe we would destroy the Clan?" Bramblepaw protested. "We've risked our lives to help save them!"

"I know." Crowpaw dipped her head. "And no cat really thinks you would—in fact, only Sandstar, Cinderpelt, Fireheart, Silverstream, and I even know about it..." She was desperate to reassure her sister. "We believe you would never do anything to harm us." Crowpaw realized that Squirrelflight had said nothing. But he was staring at her, his eyes dark with worry, and she felt a flash of inexplicable fear. "Squirrelflight?"

"Are you sure we wouldn't destroy the Clan?" he growled.

"W-what do you mean?"

"Of course we wouldn't!" Bramblepaw rounded on Squirrelflight in anger and confusion.

"Not on purpose," Squirrelflight meowed. "But it's us, isn't it—fire and tiger—who want to lead the Clan away from its home and on a long, dangerous journey when we don't even know where we're meant to be going?"

A cold shiver rippled down Crowpaw's spine. Cinderpelt's prophecy suddenly seemed more frightening than it ever had before. If the Clan left the forest, following Bramblepaw and Squirrelflight, what terrible fate awaited them?

When the three cats returned to Sunningrocks, the leaf-bare sun was already low in the sky. Each cat carried a piece of fresh-kill: Crowpaw had caught a mouse; Squirrelflight held a starling in his jaws; Bramblepaw carried a plump thrush.

Crowpaw longed to go to sleep and forget Squirrelflight's worrying warning. But she was a medicine cat, and she could not rest until she knew the Clan was all right. As she followed her sister up the slope, she wondered if Cody had managed to persuade Dustpelt to eat the poppy seed.

Sorreltail met them. "The fresh-kill pile is over there." He gestured with his tail to a meager heap farther up the rock. Ashfur sat guard beside it, scanning the sky for birds of prey. The days were gone when the fresh-kill pile lay at the edge of the camp, well stocked and unguarded.

As Crowpaw dropped her offering onto the pile she was shocked by how small it was. There would not be enough for a whole piece of prey each. Tonight she would go without, she decided. She felt too tired to ear anyway.

She padded toward Cinderpelt and Mousefur, who were lying underneath a shallow overhang. The medicine cat looked exhausted, as much in need of his healing herbs as any of his Clanmates.

"How's Dustpelt?" Crowpaw asked.

Cinderpelt looked up. "She's resting now. Cody's taking good care of her."

"Not bad for a kittypet, that one," Mousefur added with a twitch of his tail. "He looked so nervous when he arrived I didn't think he'd settle in. But it looks like he'll be okay here—for a while, anyway."

Crowpaw blinked gratefully at the dusky brown cat, then turned to Cinderpelt again. There was something she had to ask, even though she dreaded hearing the answer. "Will Dustpelt lose her other kit?"

"Whitekit is strong enough for now," Cinderpelt reassured her. "And with only one mouth to feed, Dustpelt should be able to give him more milk."

"He won't last through leaf-bare if we stay here, though," Mousefur commented. His eyes betrayed alarm as he saw Ferncloud padding

toward him. "I hope he didn't hear that," he whispered. "He's mourned enough today."

"I did hear, Mousefur," Ferncloud meowed wearily. "And I agree. We must leave the forest."

Crowpaw stared at him in shock. Hollykit's death seemed to have crushed the last morsel of strength in him.

Ferncloud raised his voice so that his deep meow rang around the rock. All the other cats stared at him in astonishment.

"We must leave the forest as soon as we can!" he insisted, his eyes blazing. He swung his head around to look at Squirrelflight. "Your message from Starclan is the only sign of hope we've had," he meowed.

Mousefur stood up. "Before we can leave, we'll need a new deputy."

As he spoke, Sandstar appeared from the edge of the forest, carrying a scrawny blackbird. He had clearly heard his words. His eyes glittered as he dropped the blackbird onto the fresh-kill pile and strode up the slope. "Thunderclan has a deputy. When Silverstream returns, he won't find another cat in his place." He turned to face Ferncloud. "I'm glad you agree we must leave," he meowed. "But we cannot leave yet, not without the other Clans."

"I have only one kit left," Ferncloud meowed. "He will die if we stay. We will probably all die."

"Then we must try harder to persuade the other Clans to leave," Sandstar growled.

"The other Clans can come when they are ready," Ferncloud retorted. "We are ready now."

Sandstar returned the warrior's gaze. "We cannot leave yet," he repeated.

"Dustpelt still needs to rest," Cinderpelt put in quietly.

Sandstar acknowledged his support with a brief nod.

Squirrelflight faced Ferncloud. "I know you are mourning two kits," he mewed. "And that you fear for the other. But Sandstar is right. Starclan would not want us to leave without the other Clans." He turned to the other cats. "Starclan chose a cat from each Clan to carry Midnight's message back. We had to work together to survive, without ever thinking of the differences between our Clans. Starclan wanted us to share the journey, to learn how to help one another. They must want us to travel together now."

Sandstar padded across the rock to stand beside the young warrior. "We need to send out more hunting patrols," he meowed. "We are under no threat from the other Clans now. Riverclan has more food than we do. They have no need to attack." He stared around at the gaunt, hungry cats. "We can devote all our patrols to hunting from now on. We will find enough food in the forest until it is time to leave. Yes, Ferncloud, we *will* leave. I will visit Riverclan and Shadowclan and try to persuade them once more."

Relief washed over Crowpaw as the cats began to nod their acceptance. Then her heart lurched again as Mousefur stepped forward.

"But what about Silverstream?" When Sandstar flinched, he went on. "Whether he's coming back or not, we need to find another deputy for as long as he's not here, someone to carry out his duties."

"Yes," Ferncloud agreed. "You haven't named anyone yet." He glanced at Squirrelflight. "You should choose someone young. Some cat Starclan clearly approves of."

Crowpaw looked around. Ashfur, Birchpaw, Lionheart, and Brightheart were staring at Squirrelflight. Even Blossomfall seemed to be watching the young cat, as though he might be the one to fill Silverstream's pawprints. Only Mousefur and Rainwhisker were looking elsewhere.

"Sorreltail has enough experience," Mousefur suggested. "He is young and strong and has earned his warrior name many times over."

Rainwhisker nodded. "Sorreltail would be a good deputy."

"Why are you talking like this? Silverstream is not dead!" Sandstar spat. "He is still our deputy." The bristling fur along his spine warned the other cats not to argue. He shook himself and blinked, calming down. "But you are right. Someone must carry out Silverstream's duties. So until he returns, the senior warriors shall share them." He glanced at Sorreltail. "You shall organize the new hunting patrols. Fireheart can organize work within the camp. Squirrelflight, you can help me try to convince Shadowclan and Riverclan that we must leave the forest together." He stalked toward the overhang and as he passed Crowpaw he called to her, "I want to speak to you," he meowed. "Alone."

Crowpaw followed him uneasily to the hollow. She glanced down at Cody, who was still in the makeshift nursery. The kittypet was busy washing Whitekit, ignoring the tiny kit's mews of complaint. Dustpelt lay sleeping beside them. Feeling relieved that the cat who needed it most was resting, Crowpaw ducked beneath the overhang into the shadowy cavern.

Sandstar looked urgently into her eyes. "Crowpaw," he meowed. "You must tell me if you have had any sign from Starclan."

"No, nothing," she answered, surprised by his intensity. "What about Cinderpelt?"

"He has heard nothing either." Sandstar blinked. "I was hoping they might have spoken to you."

Crowpaw shifted her paws awkwardly. Though she was pleased her father had such faith in her, she felt uncomfortable that he thought Starclan might share with her rather than the Clan's medicine cat.

"Why are they so quiet?" Sandstar continued angrily, unsheathing his claws against the cold stone floor. "Are they trying to tell us each Clan must look after itself rather than leave the forest together?"

"I felt the same when the Twolegs captured me," Crowpaw admitted. "Starclan did not visit me once in my dreams while I lay in that stinking cage. I felt as if I was utterly alone. But I wasn't." She returned her father's solemn gaze. "My Clanmates came to

rescue me."

Sandstar opened his eyes wide as she went on. "Starclan won't do anything to keep the Clans together. They don't have to. Being one of four Clans—not two, not three, but four—lies within our hearts, just like the ability to track prey and hide in the forest shadows. No matter what the other Clans say, they cannot turn away from the divisions, the differences, the rivalries that bind us. The line that separates us from Windclan or Riverclan is also the line that connects us. Starclan knows this, and it is up to us to have faith in that connection."

Sandstar stared at his daughter as though he were seeing her for the first time. "I wish you could have known Spottedleaf," he murmured. "You remind me of him."

Touched beyond words, Crowpaw lowered her gaze. She sensed that this was not the time to tell her father that Spottedleaf had spoken to her in dreams several times. It was enough that Sandstar thought her a worthy companion of the former Thunderclan medicine cat, who padded tirelessly through the stars, watching over his Clanmates.

She just hoped with all her heart that Spottedleaf, and their other warrior ancestors, would come with them when the Clans finally abandoned the forest.

Chapter 10

Sandstar led the patrol upriver, keeping close to the border where tempting prey-scent drifted across the water from Riverclan's territory. Bramblepaw padded behind him in step with Squirrelflight, while Ashfur brought up the rear. It was the first time in days that she and Squirrelflight had left the camp together. Sandstar had taken the dark ginger warrior with him to Riverclan and Shadowclan, to plead with them once more to leave the forest. He'd done his best, but Leopardstar and Blackstar both still refused to believe that their future lay with the other Clans, far from their forest home.

Clouds had rolled in overnight, and freezing drizzle hung under the trees, refusing to fall as proper rain but still soaking everything it touched. Bramblepaw's fur clung uncomfortably to her body as the dampness soaked into her pelt. The trees shone wetly in the bleak leaf-bare light and dripped water onto the fallen leaves below, turning the loose, crisp piles into slippery clumps.

Suddenly Sandstar stopped and lifted his nose to scent the air. Bramblepaw took a deep breath, hoping to catch the welcome aroma of mouse or thrush or vole. But there was no prey-scent coming from this side of the river, only something that seemed strange and familiar all at the same time.

"I think I recognize that smell," she whispered to Squirrelflight.

"It smells like a rogue," Squirrelflight growled.

"Hush!" Sandstar commanded. He paused, then dashed forward with his hackles raised. The bushes ahead shivered and a tawny cat burst out. As it streaked away Squirrelflight yowled a battle cry, joining the chase.

"Come on!" he called, but Bramblepaw was already charging after him.

The tawny cat swerved toward the scent-markers at the Riverclan border. Sandstar headed after it without slackening the pace. Bramblepaw felt a jolt of alarm as she neared the warning scents. The Thunderclan cats were gaining on the rogue as he pelted over the border. The moment Sandstar's paws crossed the line in pursuit, a furious yowl sounded close by, and a dark brown tabby Riverclan warrior leaped from a swath of bracken, snarling viciously.

Sandstar turned, skidding on the wet leaves, and stopped barely over the border. Squirrelflight and Ashfur almost crashed into him, but managed to stop in time.

"Hawkfrost!" Squirrelflight gasped.

Sandstar took a step backward over the border. But he continued to stare at Hawkfrost, his eyes stretched wide as though he was staring into the face of a Starclan warrior. Bramblepaw was surprised that Hawkfrost's ambush had shocked her father so much. It was hardly strange to encounter a warrior patrolling this close to the border, when every cat in Riverclan knew how close their neighbors were to starvation.

"What are you doing on Riverclan territory?" Hawkfrost demanded.

Sandstar did not answer at first. Then he seemed to recover himself, letting his fur lie flat and relaxing his shoulders. "I was chasing that rogue out of Thunderclan territory," he replied. He glanced at the tawny tom who had halted beside Hawkfrost. "Why challenge me when you have allowed a rogue to cross your borders?"

Hawkfrost exchanged a long look with the rogue before she answered. "My father will always be welcome in Riverclan," she meowed.

Alexander! Suddenly Bramblepaw recognized the rogue she had helped escape from the Twoleg nest. She felt the mild triumph of curiosity satisfied. It was common knowledge that Hawkfrost and her brother, Mothwing, had been left in Riverclan by their rogue father, though he hadn't stayed in the forest long enough to be known by other Clans.

But Sandstar seemed to have more unanswered questions, because he stood rigid, staring at father and daughter with his ears pricked.

With a small dip of his head, Alexander meowed a greeting. "I have heard much about you, Sandstar," he murmured. "It is... interesting to meet you at last." His voice was icy and dignified, and Bramblepaw felt self-consciously young and awkward by comparison.

"So you are Alexander?" Sandstar meowed softly, his eyes glittering.

"You look as if you expected something else," Alexander suggested.

Sandstar's gaze swept along his well-groomed pelt. "You don't look like a rogue."

"And you don't look like a kittypet," Alexander countered. Bramblepaw winced, but her father showed no anger. Instead he met Alexander's proud gaze evenly.

"I have often wondered why a rogue would choose to leave his kits with a Clan."

"Why would a Clan make a kittypet their leader?" Alexander responded. He did not wait for an answer. "Not all cats are true to their birthright, Sandstar. Some choose their own path."

Sandstar narrowed his eyes. "Are you such a cat?"

"Maybe," Alexander meowed. "Maybe not. But I hope my kits are." He glanced at Hawkfrost, and Bramblepaw saw a flash of pride in his eyes.

"Will you stay with Riverclan awhile?" Hawkfrost invited him. "We have plenty of prey." She cast a mocking glance at Sandstar, but Sandstar didn't react. He simply watched, his eyes still narrowed in thought as Alexander gave his answer.

"I won't stay long," he told her. "But I would like to see Mothwing before I leave."

Hawkfrost curled her lip at Sandstar. "I shall send a patrol as soon

as I get back to the camp to make sure you have not been stealing Riverclan prey," she warned.

"We have no need to steal," Sandstar retorted. He looked at his patrol. "Come on."

Though the air still crackled with tension, Bramblepaw knew that the danger had passed. Hawkfrost and Sandstar turned from each other and padded away from the border. She prepared to follow her father, but before they had reached the safety of the trees, Sandstar halted and called out to Alexander. His voice was strangely calm.

"Goldenstar was their father, wasn't he?"

Alexander didn't seem surprised by the question. He nodded. "Yes, he was."

The ground lurched beneath Bramblepaw. No wonder Sandstar had looked so surprised when Hawkfrost had leaped out in front of him. He must have thought it was Goldenstar himself, granted a tenth life. He'd seen Hawkfrost before at moonlit gatherings, and at the disastrous meeting at Fourtrees the other night, but perhaps this was the first time they had come face-to-face in daylight.

Then she heard a gasp beside her and saw Squirrelflight standing with his eyes wide. "But Goldenstar was my father too!" he croaked. "Does this mean I have kin in *two* other Clans?"

Hawkfrost flicked her gaze to her half kin. "I'm surprised you hadn't guessed," she meowed. Bramblepaw looked from one cat to the other, finally noticing the similarities in their body types and powerful shoulders.

"I thought Rowanclaw and I were the only ones..." Squirrelflight murmured.

"At least you had a chance to know our father." Hawkfrost twitched her tail. "I envy you that."

"I learned more from Sandstar than I ever did from Goldenstar," Squirrelflight retorted.

"But still, Goldenstar knew you. He never even set eyes on me."

Bramblepaw felt a twinge of sympathy for her, knowing how much she cherished her relationship with her own father, but she pushed it away. There was something about the Riverclan warrior that she didn't trust.

Hawkfrost's gaze hardened. "Get away from this border," she warned, kneading the ground with her long, hooked claws—claws like those of the black-and-orange tigers that elders described in their stories. "I will defend my Clan against any cat if I have to."

She turned and led her father down to the river, and together they waded through the water and disappeared into the bushes on the other side. Bramblepaw watched them go in silence, knowing she meant her threat.

Chapter 11 (TW: Animal Death)

The rain grew heavier as Sandstar led the patrol back to camp. Bramblepaw was disappointed with how little prey they had caught. Squirrelflight had managed to scramble up an oak and catch a squirrel dozing in the crook of a branch, but the effort had left him breathless, and Bramblepaw realized that the hungry days since they had returned to the Clan were beginning to have an effect on them both.

"I think it's best if we don't tell the others what we learned about Hawkfrost," Sandstar decided as they trekked through the dripping trees.

"But shouldn't the Clan be prepared in case"—Bramblepaw faltered —"in case anything happens?" she finished lamely.

Squirrelflight dropped the squirrel he held in his jaws. Rainwater streamed from his whiskers. "I think Sandstar's right," he agreed. "It would be better for the Clan if they didn't know."

Bramblepaw narrowed her eyes. Was it the Clan Squirrelflight was interested in protecting, or himself? Was he afraid of what the other cats would say? He had struggled long enough already to prove his loyalty, and yet no cat could forget his father's efforts to destroy Thunderclan.

"There's no point stirring up unnecessary hostility," Sandstar went on.

Ashfur gave a low growl. "But what if Hawkfrost shares her father's ambition to take over the whole forest?" She clearly shared Bramblepaw's secret fear.

"We mustn't jump to conclusions," Sandstar warned. "It's clear that Hawkfrost's first loyalty is to her Clan. She said she would fight to defend them. Does that sound like Goldenstar to you?"

Reluctantly, Ashfur shook her head, and Sandstar went on. "Hawkfrost is no threat to us."

"Yet," Ashfur mewed pointedly.

"Until she proves she is, there's no need to worry the rest of the Clan," Sandstar continued. "We might need Riverclan's help before this is over."

Ashfur swished her tail in frustration, but did not argue.

"Don't worry, Ashfur," Bramblepaw reassured her. She hoped she sounded more confident than she felt. "Hawkfrost is just Hawkfrost. Goldenstar has left nothing bad in the forest except memories."

Squirrelflight picked up the squirrel without commenting and padded away toward Sunningrocks. Bramblepaw cast an anxious glance at her father.

"He'll be okay," he meowed quietly as he brushed past her.

By the time the cats reached Sunningrocks, rain was battering the exposed rock, and water ran down in rivulets, turning the earth around the rocks to mud. But instead of finding shelter, the cats were gathered halfway up the slope, huddled in a circle. Moans of sorrow mingled with the rattling of the rain on the stone.

With a startled mew, Sandstar bounded up the rock, and Bramblepaw followed, pushing through the cats with her heart beating in her throat. A small dark brown shape lay in the center, pelted by rain which turned pale red as it streamed away down the stone. Bramblepaw stared down at the limp, sodden body, too shocked to speak as she recognized the narrow muzzle. It was Shrewpaw.

Cinderpelt and Crowpaw crouched beside the apprentice.

"Her neck is broken," Cinderpelt murmured. "She must have died as soon as the Twoleg monster hit her. She would have felt no pain."

Bramblepaw closed her eyes. *Starclan, what are you doing?* she yowled silently.

A desolate cry sounded from the nursery hollow, and Dustpelt hurtled down the slope. Shrewpaw had been one of her first litter. The cats parted to let her see her dead kit.

"What have I done to Starclan that they would steal so much from me?" she wailed.

"Don't blame Starclan," Crowpaw mewed gently. "It is the Twolegs that have done this."

"Why didn't Starclan stop them?" Dustpelt sobbed.

"They are powerless against the Twolegs, just like we are," Crowpaw whispered. She gave herself a shake, then straightened up and called, "Cody?"

Bramblepaw watched the kittypet weave his way through the gathered cats. His ribs were beginning to show through his flanks, but he hadn't tried to insist that any warriors be spared from hunting patrols to take him home.

"I think Dustpelt should go back to the nursery," Crowpaw meowed.

"It's flooded with rain," Cody told her. "I've put Whitekit in the warriors' den beneath the overhang. I'll take Dustpelt to join him."

"Good idea," Crowpaw mewed. "Do you still have the poppy seeds?"

Cody nodded. He looked at Dustpelt, who was distraught with grief. "Whitekit is hungry and crying for food," he murmured. "But I think he can manage solid food if I chew it up first. Dustpelt isn't going to be able to feed him herself for a while, poor thing."

"Squirrelflight caught a squirrel. He could have that," Bramblepaw suggested.

"I'll bring it to the den," Ashfur offered.

Cody nudged Dustpelt with his nose, and with Crowpaw's help they managed to lead her away from her dead kit and back to the shelter of the warriors' den.

"How did this happen?" Sandstar demanded when they had gone.

"She was with me," began Blossomfall, Shrewpaw's mentor. His fur stood on end, and his eyes were huge with despair. "She was chasing a pheasant."

"Why didn't she see the Twoleg monster?"

"She was chasing a *pheasant,*" Blossomfall repeated. "It would have fed half the Clan. She forgot to be careful."

"Didn't you hear or smell the monster and warn her?" Sandstar's question was filled more with sorrow than accusation.

Blossomfall miserably shook his head. "With prey so scarce, the hunting is better if we split up. I wasn't close enough to see what was going on."

Sandstar dipped his head, understanding.

"I'll sit with her." Birchpaw's young voice sounded over the beating of the rain. Shrewpaw had been her denmate since kithood, and the sorrow of losing her glistened in her amber eyes. "I don't care if we've been driven out of our camp. We can still hold a vigil."

"I'll join you," Blossomfall croaked. He leaned down and pressed his nose against Shrewpaw's bloody flank.

The other cats began filing past to bid farewell to their young Clanmate. When it came to her turn, Bramblepaw stooped low over Shrewpaw's body, her heart aching. "You were an apprentice in Thunderclan, but you'll be a warrior with Starclan," she whispered.

She turned away and padded down the slope toward the shelter of the trees, her sadness feeling like part of the rain and tiredness that seemed to seep right through to her bones. She spotted Squirrelflight sitting beneath a larch tree, watching her.

"I can't believe Shrewpaw is dead." She sighed.

"I know," Squirrelflight murmured, entwining his tail with hers.

Bramblepaw leaned closer to him. "Dustpelt is heartbroken."

"She will find comfort in having the rest of her Clan around her." Squirrelflight sighed.

Bramblepaw couldn't help feeling that he was talking about more than Dustpelt's grief.

"After all, the Clan means more to a cat than real kin," he went on.

"Even Rowanclaw?"

"She is with Shadowclan now. My loyalty to her comes second to Thunderclan, and she understands that."

"And what about Hawkfrost and Mothwing? Do you feel anything for them, now that you know you share the same father?"

"Knowing we share the same father doesn't change anything," Squirrelflight went on. "I am nothing like Hawkfrost." The tip of his tail twitched anxiously. "Am I?"

"Of course not," Bramblepaw replied hotly. "No cat would think you are."

"Even when they find out what we have in common?"

"Thunderclan will always think of you as a brave warrior, loyal to his Clan," Bramblepaw reassured him.

"Thank you." He gave her a quick lick on the cheek before getting to his paws and moving away toward the river.

Bramblepaw followed, keeping pace with him until he sat down and stared across the border into Riverclan territory.

Bramblepaw followed his gaze. The river carved its way through the small glade, its surface shattered by the pouring rain. She peered closer and blinked. "Look, Squirrelflight!" she mewed in surprise. "Look at the river!"

"What about it?"

"Do you remember when Hawkfrost and Alexander waded across it earlier?"

"Yes." Squirrelflight twitched his ear. "So?"

"Well, they *waded* across it," Bramblepaw repeated. "They didn't swim; they *waded*."

Squirrelflight looked baffled.

"Look at the stepping stones!" Bramblepaw jumped up and pointed with her tail. "They're sticking right out of the water. After rain like this, in the middle of leaf-bare, they should be nearly covered."

"You're right." Squirrelflight sat up.

"Surely the river shouldn't be this shallow?"

"Well, it's been quite dry lately," Squirrelflight commented.

"Not that dry," she argued. "It's been pouring all day today, but the river's not swollen at all. Something must be wrong."

"Like what?"

Just then a familiar voice called from the bank opposite, "What are you two up to?"

Brookleap appeared and waded across the stream. "Are you finding it as hard as I am, being cooped up in camp after our journey?"

"Yes. Everything is harder. Shrewpaw died," Bramblepaw told him sadly. "Birchpaw's sitting vigil." Suddenly she wondered if they should be back at camp, mourning their lost Clanmates. She glanced at Squirrelflight, who seemed to understand her anxiety.

"We'll join them soon," he promised.

"Do you want me to catch you a fish to take back?" Brookleap offered.

"The Clan needs all the fresh-kill they can get," Squirrelflight

meowed. "But I don't think they'd accept it."

"Are you sure?" Brookleap asked. "They're easy to catch now that the water's dropped."

"So I was right. The level *is* lower than usual," Bramblepaw mewed, gazing again at the shallow stream. "Is something wrong?"

Brookleap shrugged. "Just a dry spell. This rain will get it flowing again."

Bramblepaw picked up a trace of Alexander's stale scent on the breeze. She glanced at Brookleap; the mystery of the river seemed suddenly less important than how the rest of Riverclan felt about the rogue tom who seemed to come and go as he wished—and whose kits had so much influence in their adopted Clan. "We saw Alexander this morning," she began.

"You know Alexander?" Brookleap looked surprised. "Oh, I forgot. You met her when you rescued Blackclaw, didn't you? When... when my father was taken."

His voice trailed away, and Bramblepaw pressed her flank against his. "I'm so sorry," she murmured helplessly.

Brookleap nudged her with his nose. "So am I. I wish I could have been there to help," he meowed. "But my father made his own decision to help the trapped cats." He took a deep breath before he went on. "Thanks to him we got Blackclaw back. The whole of Riverclan was amazed when she showed up."

"Hawkfrost especially, I'm sure," Squirrelflight commented. Bramblepaw shot him a warning glance. Hawkfrost had been made deputy when Blackclaw disappeared, which meant she might not have welcomed Blackclaw back with the same enthusiasm as every other cat, but was Squirrelfilght giving away too much interest in Alexander's kit? They couldn't be sure how much Brookleap knew about Hawkfrost's parentage.

"Well, I doubt she wanted to stop being deputy quite so soon," Brookleap agreed. "But she welcomed her return as much as any

cat. She's a good warrior. She knows she'll be deputy one day, and she doesn't mind waiting."

"She sounds very confident," Bramblepaw remarked carefully.

"She's always been like that," Brookleap replied. "What's more important is that she's totally loyal to the Clan, and sticks to the warrior code like a caterpillar to a leaf."

Bramblepaw blinked. Somehow she didn't think Brookleap had the faintest idea of who Hawkfrost's father was. She looked at Squirrelflight, trying to read his reaction, but Squirrelflight had something else on his mind.

"Do you think there's any chance Leopardstar will change his mind about leaving the forest?"

"Leopardstar says he's not going anywhere as long as there's fish in the river," Brookleap told him.

"Doesn't he care about the Clans staying together?" Bramblepaw demanded.

"He did ask Brightsky if he'd had any sign from Starclan, just to be sure," Brookleap told her defensively. "But Brightsky hasn't left his nest much recently."

"So he's had no sign either?" Bramblepaw asked, disappointed.

"Nothing." Brookleap sighed. "It looks like the sign Midnight promised us isn't going to come, now that the Twolegs have destroyed Fourtrees."

"Perhaps we've seen the sign but just not realized what it was," Bramblepaw wondered out loud.

"Well, we've seen plenty of dying since we got back," Squirrelflight muttered darkly. "Not just warriors, but kits and apprentices, too. But you know what? I'm beginning to think that no cat's going to show us the way. Wherever we're going, we'll have to find our own way there."

Chapter 12

Crowpaw raked through the fur at the base of her tail, scraping out the troublesome flea. She cracked its fat body between her teeth, tasting with some satisfaction the blood it had stolen from her. "Got it!"

"Don't tell the others you had an extra piece of fresh-kill," Bramblepaw joked. "They'll all want one."

Crowpaw's belly growled. The vole she had just shared with her sister and barely touched her hunger. They were lying side by side in a shallow dip in the stone, watching the sun sink behind Sunningrocks. The clouds had cleared, and a perfect half-moon hung in the blue evening sky.

"Has Cinderpelt decided whether you're going to make the journey to the Moonstone tonight?" Bramblepaw meowed.

"He's speaking with Sandstar about it now," Crowpaw replied. The medicine cats of every Clan met each half moon at Mothermouth to share tongues with Starclan. They didn't need the half moon to secure a truce—medicine cats lived outside the differences between Clans that sometimes led to quarrels—but it was an important time for sharing concerns and advice about treating their Clanmates.

Crowpaw saw Cinderpelt emerge, and she clambered to her paws, keen to find out if they would be going to Highstones in spite of the dangers that lurked in the forest.

But Cinderpelt shook his head as he came over and stood at the edge of the hollow. "Sandstar agrees with me," he reported. "We can't risk the journey with so many Twolegs and monsters about."

"But we need to share with Starclan now more than ever!" Crowpaw protested.

"Sandstar says he cannot risk losing us, and he's right. Where would the Clan be without a medicine cat?"

Crowpaw sighed and scraped at the rock with her claw.

"Starclan will share with us if they wish to," Cinderpelt mewed.

Crowpaw shrugged. "Maybe."

"Well, I'm glad you're not going," Bramblepaw meowed as Cinderpelt padded away. "I nearly lost you to the Twolegs once. I don't think I could bear it again."

Crowpaw gave her sister a quick, fond lick on her hand and settled down again. "Do you think the Riverclan cats will go to Highstones?" she wondered out loud. It was strange to think that the other medicine cats might be making the journey without them. Would Starclan think Cinderpelt and Crowpaw were being cowardly?

"I doubt they'll risk it," Bramblepaw told her. "Last time Squirrelflight and I saw Brookleap, he said Brightsky was pretty sick."

"I was just hoping that, if the medicine cats from all the Clans traveled to the Moonstone together, it might bring us closer," Crowpaw admitted.

Bramblepaw nodded. "I know. You'd think trouble like this would unite us, like it did when Bloodclan attacked, but instead we seem forests apart."

"Each Clan seemed to have its own idea about what to do," Crowpaw sighed. "If only Starclan would give us a sign!"

"Were you hoping that Starclan might share something with you tonight?"

Crowpaw gave a small nod, avoiding her sister's gaze. She didn't want to betray the fear that had made her heart pound all day: the cold dread that they would go all the way to the Moonstone and find Starclan silent even there.

"It's stupid that the Clans should find it so hard to come together." Bramblepaw's mew interrupted her thoughts. "They have far more in common than they think."

Crowpaw looked thoughtfully at her sister, suddenly wondering what Bramblepaw was hinting at.

"After all, Shadowclan, Riverclan, and Thunderclan even share kin," Bramblepaw went on.

"You mean Rowanclaw and Brookleap?"

"Not just them." Bramblepaw's tail twitched as she spoke. "There are other cats linked to Thunderclan by blood."

With a jolt Crowpaw wondered if her sister had discovered a secret she had known for a moon and kept to herself. "Are you talking about Goldenstar being Hawkfrost and Mothwing's father?"

Bramblepaw stared at her in astonishment. "Have you been sharing my dreams again?"

Crowpaw shook her head. "I've known for some time," she admitted.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Bramblepaw demanded.

"I didn't think it mattered. Not right now, when all the Clans are in danger. Why should it make a difference if Goldenstar is Hawkfrost and Mothwing's father?" Crowpaw knew she was trying to convince herself. The last thing the Clans needed was another cat with Goldenstar's hunger for power.

"A warrior like Hawkfrost can't be trusted," Bramblepaw insisted.

Crowpaw felt an uneasy knot twist in her belly. "But Goldenstar is Squirrelflight's father too," she pointed out. "And Squirrelflight is a loyal warrior."

"Squirrelflight has nothing to do with this," Bramblepaw snapped.

"Of course not," Crowpaw agreed quickly. "I only meant that having Goldenstar as a father doesn't mean a warrior has to follow in his

pawsteps." She prayed this was true.

"Good." Bramblepaw nodded. "Because Squirrelflight is completely different from Hawkfrost. They have nothing in common. Nothing."

Crowpaw curled into a ball beside her sister and buried her nose under her paws for warmth. Bramblepaw's words had sounded like an echo—were they Squirrelflight's, perhaps?

"Good night, Bramblepaw," she whispered, curling up close to Bramblepaw, their sharp words forgotten. Crowpaw did not need a visit from Starclan to tell her that her sister was falling in love with Squirrelflight. Amid everything else that was going on, and however much Crowpaw missed the connection that once only the two of them shared, this felt right and good for the whole Clan.

She closed her eyes. *I wonder if Starclan will share my dreams,* she thought as sleep tugged at her like a gentle river. It was a half moon, after all; that had to count for something, even if they weren't at the Moonstone.

Crowpaw felt the insistent nudge of a nose prodding her awake. "Who is it?" she whispered sleepily.

"It's me, Mothwing." The young cat's voice trembled with fear.

Crowpaw blinked open her eyes and saw the Riverclan apprentice outlined in the pale moonlight.

"Come quick; I need you," Mothwing mewed under his breath.

Crowpaw felt her sister stirring beside her. "What's going on?" Bramblepaw yawned.

"It's Mothwing," Crowpaw told her.

Bramblepaw was on her paws in an instant. "What are you doing in our camp?" she hissed.

"I need Crowpaw's help," Mothwing explained. "Brightsky is very ill."

"And you thought you'd just creep in here in the middle of the night?"

"Be quiet, Bramblepaw, before you wake the whole Clan," Crowpaw growled. She wanted to tell her sister to stop seeing Goldenstar's son standing in front of them, and see him instead as a medicine cat in trouble, but she didn't want to make Mothwing feel uncomfortable. "Wait here, both of you," she meowed. "I'll go and tell Sandstar and Cinderpelt."

"But—" Mothwing began.

Crowpaw silenced him with a glance. "I'll come with you, but I have to tell them where I'm going." Leaving the two cats in uneasy silence, she hurried up the slope to the overhang. She crept into the shady cavern and followed her father's scent.

Sandstar lifted his head drowsily. "Is that you, Crowpaw?" Beside him, Fireheart shifted but did not wake.

"Mothwing's came to ask if I could go and help Brightsky. He's really ill."

She saw a shadow moving toward her from the back of the den, and scented Cinderpelt.

"What's he treating him with?" the medicine cat called under his breath.

"I don't know," Crowpaw replied.

"Do you think it's safe to go?" Sandstar's eyes gleamed anxiously in the gloom.

"Mothwing wouldn't lie to me," she assured him, guessing he feared an ambush from strong Riverclan cats.

"Then you must go," Sandstar murmured. "But if you are not back by dawn, I'll send a patrol to fetch you."

"We'll be back," Cinderpelt promised. He met Crowpaw's surprised gaze. "I'm coming too. We must do everything we can to help

Brightsky." He led Crowpaw out of the den to the crevice where he kept his supplies and pulled out several bundles of leaves.

Crowpaw picked up half the bundles, and they hurried down the rock to where Mothwing waited with her sister.

"I'm coming with you," Bramblepaw announced.

Crowpaw shook her head. "No need," she muttered through the bundles dangling from her teeth.

"I'll make sure they both return safely," Mothwing meowed.

Bramblepaw stared distrustfully at the Riverclan cat, and Crowpaw knew her sister was seeing a different cat, broad-shouldered with gleaming yellow eyes. Though they had been born many moons after Goldenstar's death, both sisters had heard him described enough times to be able to picture him as well as any of their Clanmates.

"Remember Squirrelflight," she whispered to her sister. Sharing Goldenstar's blood did not mean a cat shared his dark heart.

"Lead the way, Mothwing." Cinderpelt's order was muffled by the bundles he carried, but Mothwing nodded and bounded silently down the slope.

They waded easily across the river, keeping the herbs above the water. Crowpaw thought back to barely a moon ago, when she had crossed the stepping stones to help a Riverclan apprentice, she had nearly been swept away by the force of the water, and only the spirit of Spottedleaf had stopped her from plunging into the rain-swollen flood. Now the stream trickled quietly around the rocks, hardly covering the pebbles on the riverbed.

Mothwing led the Thunderclan cats into the reed beds; they were no longer marshy, but felt dry underpaw. Crowpaw's heart quickened at the thought of entering another Clan's camp, but Mothwing seemed unconcerned and took them straight into the clearing among the reeds. Unfamiliar eyes gleamed in the shadows, but there was nothing but worry and curiosity in their faces.

"Good, you have come," Leopardstar greeted them. Even in the moonlight Crowpaw could see that the Riverclan leader was not as well fed as he had been lately. His pelt hung from his body, and his eyes had the dullness of hunger that Crowpaw had begun to accept as normal.

But why should Riverclan cats be starving when the Twolegs were still a long way from their territory?

"Brightsky is in his den," Leopardstar meowed. "Mothwing will take you." He stared into Cinderpelt's eyes. "Do everything you can, but don't let him suffer. He has served this Clan well, and if Starclan needs him more than we do, then we should let him go in peace."

Crowpaw followed Cinderpelt and Mothwing through a narrow reed-lined passage that opened into a smaller clearing. It was so similar to the medicine clearing in the ravine that she felt a pang of longing for her old home.

A low moan came from a shadowy corner.

"It's all right, Brightsky," Mothwing whispered. "I've brought Cinderpelt."

Cinderpelt hurried over to examine the medicine cat, sniffing him and pressing gently along his flanks with his paws. Whatever it was, the sickness had taken hold far inside his frail body. Brightsky was clearly in agony, his words indistinct and filled with pain.

"Cinder... pelt... let... me... go... peacefully," he begged in a voice that rasped like claws scraping on bark.

"Lie still, my friend." Cinderpelt looked up at Mothwing. "What have you given him so far?"

"Stinging nettle for the swelling, honey and marigold to soothe the infections, feverfew to cool him, and poppy seeds for the pain." Mothwing listed his remedies so quickly that Crowpaw blinked. Last time she had seen Mothwing face a crisis—when the Riverclan apprentice nearly drowned—he had been frozen with panic, and Crowpaw had stepped in to treat the young cat instead.

"Good, that's exactly what I would have given him," Cinderpelt agreed. "Have you tried yarrow yet?"

Mothwing nodded. "But it made him sick."

"It can do that sometimes." Cinderpelt looked down at Brightsky, and his blue eyes clouded with sympathy. "I'm sorry I don't think there's much more we can do."

"But he's suffering!" Mothwing protested.

"I'll give him more poppy seeds," Cinderpelt meowed. "Do you have any marigold left?"

"Plenty." Mothwing hurried to a gap in the reed wall and drew out a pawful of crushed petals. Taking some dried berries from one of the bundles, Cinderpelt began to knead the petals into them. The berries still had enough softness in them to make a pulp. Cinderpelt sprinkled in more poppy seeds than Crowpaw had seen him use before, then she pushed the mashed herbs to Brightsky.

"This will soothe your pain," he whispered. "Eat as much as you can."

The old medicine cat began to lap at it, his eyes growing soft with gratitude as he recognized what was in the mixture. For a wild moment, Crowpaw wondered if Cinderpelt had given him enough poppy seeds to make him sleep all the way to Starclan, but she knew from the gentleness in her mentor's eyes that he was only trying to ease Brightsky's pain. However silent their warrior ancestors had been lately, Cinderpelt still trusted them to come for Brightsky when they chose to.

"Leave us now," Cinderpelt murmured to Crowpaw and Mothwing. "I'll sit with him till he sleeps."

"Will he die?" Mothwing asked, his voice quavering.

"Not yet," Cinderpelt told him. "But this will ease his suffering until Starclan calls him."

Crowpaw backed away and followed Mothwing through the tunnel

to the main clearing.

"How is he?" Leopardstar demanded as soon as they emerged into the silvery pool of moonlight.

"Cinderpelt's doing all he can," Mothwing reported.

Leopardstar nodded, then turned and padded away.

"I've never been here before," Crowpaw mewed, hoping to distract Mothwing. "It's well-sheltered."

The young cat shrugged. "It's a good camp."

"I'm not surprised Leopardstar doesn't want to leave it," Crowpaw went on, being careful to keep her voice nonthreatening. She was curious about Leopardstar's sudden thinness—and by the look of the other cats moving around the edge of the clearing, the Riverclan leader was not the only cat going hungry here.

"You're running out of fish now that the river's so low, aren't you?" Crowpaw guessed bravely.

Mothwing looked at her for a long moment. "Yes. We haven't eaten well for a while."

"Does that mean Leopardstar might consider leaving now?"

To her dismay, Mothwing shook his head. "Leopardstar says we will stay as long as there are no Twolegs in our territory. He says that if the river cannot feed us, we will have to learn to hunt new prey."

Crowpaw felt a searing pang of frustration with the stubborn Riverclan leader—there *was* no prey, she longed to screech—but she did not want to show disrespect for Mothwing's Clan. "You've become a great medicine cat," she mewed, clumsily changing the subject. "Cinderpelt wouldn't have done anything different to help Brightsky."

Crowpaw almost leaped out of her fur when Hawkfrost's voice sounded beside her ear.

"You're right," she agreed. "The Clan will be lucky to have such a good medicine cat when Brightsky goes to hunt with Starclan."

"I think Hawkfrost has more faith in me than I do myself," Mothwing murmured.

"You have no reason to doubt yourself," Hawkfrost insisted. "Our father was a great warrior. Our other father is proud and strong. They shared only one flaw: that their only loyalty was—and still is, in Alexander's case—to themselves above all other cats." She paused and glanced around the clearing. "We're not like that. We understand what it means to be loyal to our Clan. We have the courage to live by the warrior code. And because of that we'll be the most powerful cats in Riverclan one day, and our Clanmates will *have* to respect us then."

Crowpaw felt as if she'd been flung headfirst into the icy river. However much Hawkfrost pledged to live by the warrior code, that sort of ambition could make her dangerous—like her father before her.

Mothwing gave a purr of amusement. "You mustn't take anything my sister says too seriously," he told Crowpaw. "She's the bravest and most loyal cat in Riverclan, but she gets carried away sometimes."

Crowpaw blinked. She hoped with all her heart that Mothwing was right. But the arrogance that glinted in Hawkfrost's eyes filled her heart with unease. Something told her—some instinct that made her fur crawl—that this was only the beginning.

Hawkfrost could not be trusted.

Chapter 13 (TW: Mentions of Suicide)

Bramblepaw dropped the mouse onto the fresh-kill pile. It did little to bulk up the meager offerings of a sparrow and a vole already brought in by the dawn patrol. Brackenfur had hunted with her, but had caught nothing.

"Take that straight to the elders," Sandstar mewed, padding over to them.

"Not Dustpelt?" Bramblepaw queried.

"Cinderpelt says she won't eat anything yet." Sandstar sighed. "But Cody has been sharing food with Whitekit."

"That kittypet should go back to his Twolegs and stop eating our fresh-kill," Brackenfur commented irritably. "He's no good for hunting."

"Cody takes hardly anything for himself," Sandstar pointed out. "And while he cares for Whitekit, the other cats have more time for hunting."

Bramblepaw glanced sympathetically at Brackenfur. She probably resented Cody more for taking up Crowpaw's time than for being a kittypet. She picked up the mouse and carried it to where the elders were making the most of the frail warmth of sunhigh at the top of Sunningrocks.

Lionheart and Smallear had their eyes closed, dozing. Longtail, the blind she-cat who was no older than some of the warriors, sat up. "I smell mouse," she mewed.

"It's not very big, I'm afraid," Bramblepaw apologized.

"It's fine," Longtail assured her. She prodded the mouse with her

paw, and the tip of her tail twitched excitedly when the little body shifted, as if the desire to hunt for herself had not dimmed.

Suddenly she lifted her head and opened her mouth to scent the air. "Windclan!" she exclaimed, more in surprise than alarm.

"What, here?" mewed Bramblepaw, looking around. She didn't think her father was expecting visitors.

At the foot of the rock, Tallstar was leading a small, bedraggled patrol out of the woods. The Thunderclan cats watched them climb slowly up to where Sandstar waited. No cat challenged them. Tallstar's step was so faltering, her frame so emaciated, that Bramblepaw was amazed she had made it all the way here. The two warriors that accompanied her were in no better condition; Smokefur and Tornear were so thin they looked like they were made of twigs and leaves, and Bramblepaw half-feared the breeze might blow them away.

Leafpaw was at the rear of the patrol, looking thinner than he had on the journey to the sun-drown-place, though he was not quite as scrawny as his companions. Bramblepaw bounded down the slope to touch noses with him in greeting. When she got closer, she saw that his eyes were as dull as his Clanmates', and his fur was ungroomed.

"Leafpaw!" she exclaimed. "Are you okay?"

"I'm as fit as any of my Clan," Leafpaw growled.

Tornear blinked at her. "Leafpaw has been hunting like a whole patrol on his own, finding prey to feed nearly all the Clan," she reported.

Bramblepaw pricked her ears.

"He even caught a hawk two sunrises ago," Tornear went on. Even though starvation seemed to have robbed the Windclan warrior of all emotion, Bramblepaw thought she detected a hint of pride in Tornear's voice.

Leafpaw shrugged. "I used a trick the Tribe taught us."

"Leafpaw!" Squirrelflight came bounding up the rock. Bramblepaw saw his eyes darken, and she guessed he was as shocked as she had been to find their friend so gaunt and lifeless.

Tallstar's voice distracted her. "Sandstar, we have come to plead for Thunderclan's help," she rasped. As if the effort of speaking were too much, her legs buckled and she collapsed onto her side, Bramblepaw started to go over to help her, but Squirrelflight held her back with a touch of his tail.

"The Twolegs have started to destroy the warrens where we have been sheltering." Tallstar panted. "We cannot stay a moment longer on the moor, but we are too weak to travel alone. I don't care that we haven't had another sign. I just know we have to leave. Take us to this sun-drown-place, I beg you."

Sandstar looked down at Tallstar, and Bramblepaw saw sorrow flash in his eyes. "We have been allies many times," he murmured. "And to watch you starve is more than I can bear." He lifted his gaze and stared into the forest, and, as he did so, the brambles under the trees rustled and a dark ginger shape exploded from the bushes.

Rowanclaw! The Shadowclan cat's pelt bristled, and her eyes were wild with fear.

"The Twolegs are attacking our camp!" she yowled, her voice echoing over the rock. "They have surrounded us with their monsters! Please come!"

Sandstar bounded down the slope ahead of the others. Even Tallstar hauled herself to her paws and hurried toward the Shadowclan warrior.

"Please help us," Rowanclaw cried to Sandstar. "Help us for the sake of the Thunderclan blood that runs in my veins, if nothing else."

Sandstar brushed the tip of his tail across her mouth. "We will come for the sake of Shadowclan," he told her gently. "And for the sake of all the Clans in the forest." He looked at his warriors. "Blossomfall, Mousefur, Fireheart, you will each lead a patrol. We will take all those strong enough to fight." Instantly the three warriors began

weaving among the cats, issuing orders.

"What about defending the camp?" Ferncloud called.

"Defend it from what?" Sandstar replied. "The only creatures that threaten us now are already attacking Shadowclan."

"What about Riverclan?" Crowpaw's quiet mew sounded from higher up the slope. She fell silent as the Thunderclan warriors turned to stare at her.

Bramblepaw's heart lurched. Her sister was right. With the camp undefended, Hawkfrost might persuade Riverclan to claim Sunningrocks for themselves.

But the warriors clearly misunderstood Crowpaw's warning. "Riverclan won't help us!" Mousefur spat.

"They might," Cinderpelt argued. "The river's drying up. Riverclan are not as well-fed as they used to be."

Bramblepaw glanced at Squirrelflight. They weren't the only ones to have noticed the river. If Riverclan were suffering, they were more likely to help Thunderclan than attack them. But her nagging suspicion of Hawkfrost remained.

Sandstar's eyes lit up with hope. "Squirrelflight!" he called. "Go to Riverclan and ask Leopardstar for help!"

"Yes, Sandstar!"

"Find Blackclaw first," Bramblepaw whispered. "And make sure Hawkfrost comes too. She shouldn't be left behind at the camp."

Squirrelflight narrowed his eyes. "You think she would attack here?"

"It's better to be safe."

Squirrelflight snorted. "You're too suspicious," he growled, and pelted away.

Bramblepaw felt a prickle of guilt. She hoped Squirrelflight didn't

think her suspicions included him.

"Bramblepaw, you'll join my patrol," Fireheart ordered. "Stay near me or Ferncloud."

Bramblepaw nodded. Her paws tingled with excitement. It was time to fight back—or time to accept that the forest had been lost, and leave. Even the Windclan warriors seemed to have brightened at the prospect of a battle. Smokefur thrashed his tail in agitation, while Tornear paced back and forth in front of him.

"We will come with you," Tallstar announced, her croaking voice finding new strength.

Sandstar shook his head. "You are not strong enough."

Tallstar fixed Sandstar with a stern gaze. "My warriors and I are coming."

Sandstar dipped his head. "Very well," he mewed respectfully. He surveyed his Clan. "Mousefur, Fireheart, Blossomfall, are your patrols ready?"

The three warriors nodded.

"This may be our last battle in the forest," Sandstar went on, his voice barely louder than a growl. "We won't be able to stop the Twolegs completely, but we can try to save Shadowclan." He looked at Crowpaw. "We'll need you with us to look after any wounded cats. Cinderpelt will stay behind and take care of the cats here."

Bramblepaw knew that the medicine cat's old injury meant he would be more valuable to the Clan here at Sunningrocks, ready to tend to any cat who returned from the battle injured. She felt a flash of protectiveness toward her sister, then reminded herself that medicine cats learned fighting skills as well as any warrior.

As Sandstar led his Clan down the slope, Bramblepaw heard Smokefur whispering to his leader.

"Tallstar, you're on your last life," he was mewing urgently. "Please stay here."

"Whether I'm on my first life or my ninth. My duty is to the forest," Tallstar replied calmly. "I will not miss this battle."

Bramblepaw saw icy determination in the old cat's eyes, and felt glad for the sake of her dignity when Smokefur just nodded and walked beside her down the slope to the other cats.

Sandstar paused for a moment at the edge of the trees to check that all the patrols were ready before charging into the forest. Bramblepaw pelted after him with Rowanclaw beside her, their paws thrumming on the hard ground. She glanced back. No cat had fallen behind; even Tallstar was keeping pace. They followed the river until they were safely past the Twoleg clearing nearest the ravine, then swerved around to reach the crest of the slope that led down to Fourtrees. Sandstar didn't hesitate, but led them straight over the top of the rise. In the hollow, the slaughtered trees had been neatly stacked in piles. With a sickening jolt Bramblepaw saw that the Great Rock had been utterly crushed, reduced to nothing more than a massive pile of cracked stone.

Leafpaw wove through the running cats and fell in step beside her. "Don't look at it," he warned. "Even if the Great Rock were still here, it wouldn't help Shadowclan."

Suddenly a yowl rang out from behind them, and Sandstar swerved to a halt. The cats behind him stopped and spun around.

Blackclaw, the Riverclan deputy, stood at the top of the slope. She had her Clan's finest warriors beside her: Brookleap, Mistyfoot, and Mothwing, and beside them the imposing shape of Hawkfrost. Next to her stood Squirrelflight, the outline of his head and shoulders matched with Hawkfrost's against the pale sky.

"Wait!" Blackclaw called down. "Riverclan will join you!"

Squirrelflight raced over to Bramblepaw.

"How did you persuade Leopardstar to let them come?" she gasped.

"It wasn't hard," Squirrelflight told her. "They're hungry and growing desperate."

Brookleap pushed his way through the restless cats to join them. "We'll be fighting together."

"It's as it should be," Leafpaw growled from behind.

Looking around, Bramblepaw realized that all the cats that had returned from the sun-drown-place were beside her—Squirrelflight, Brookleap, Leafpaw, and Rowanclaw. She glanced up at the sky. *Feathertail, are you watching us?* She closed her eyes for a moment, hoping they hadn't left their friend behind forever with the Tribe of Rushing Water.

"Come on!" Sandstar called. With a fierce battle cry, he led them toward Shadowclan territory.

The Thunderpath that had divided Thunderclan from Shadowclan for many moons lay eerily silent.

"They stopped the other monsters from coming here just before they started destroying our part of the forest," Rowanclaw whispered to Bramblepaw. "At least it makes it easier to cross," she added dryly.

The hard surface felt icy underpaw as Bramblepaw raced over it and into the trees. She heard the distant roaring of monsters and smelled their acrid scent. Her paws trembled, but fury urged her on. Leafpaw raced alongside her, his eyes grimly focused on the path. Bramblepaw was amazed that his bony, ragged body possessed such strength.

She glimpsed a Twoleg monster through the trees. Its great yellow forepaws were lowered, its claws unsheathed as it tore through the undergrowth. Suddenly a violent and unnatural sound filled the forest, and Bramblepaw scrambled to a standstill. All around, the forest rang with a dreadful creaking and groaning that seemed to split the air.

Flattening her body against the trembling forest floor, she saw a Twoleg monster only tail-lengths away. With massive paws it ripped an oak from the ground, dragging its roots from the earth as if it were a blade of grass. The tree's branches crashed like hail as the monster tipped it over and began to strip the trunk, showering the

cats with chips of bark. Something growled behind them, and Bramblepaw whirled around to find their escape blocked as another monster rolled steadily toward them.

"They're nearly at the camp!" Rowanclaw yowled.

With a sickening feeling of dread, Bramblepaw saw more monsters ahead, churning their way toward the tangle of brambles that hid the Shadowclan camp.

"We'll have to go that way," Sandstar called, gesturing with his tail toward a gap in the trees the monsters had not yet reached.

"No!" spat Leafpaw. "It'll be quicker this way!" He darted forward, heading straight for the camp.

"Stop! You'll be killed!" Bramblepaw leaped onto Leafpaw's back and dragged him to the ground, digging in her claws.

He collapsed beneath her, hissing with fury. "Get off me!"

Squirrelflight raced over to them. "Don't be such a fool, Leafpaw!"

"He's gone mad!" Bramblepaw shrieked. "I'm not going to let him kill himself!"

"I'm not frightened of joining Starclan," Leafpaw spat back. "The forest is dying anyway. At least in Starclan, Feathertail will be waiting for me!"

Chapter 14 (TW: Animal Death)

Squirrelflight leaned down and snarled into Leafpaw's face. "Would you rather join a dead warrior than fight to save live ones?" Bramblepaw felt the fight drain from Leafpaw's body, but Squirrelflight went on. "Your Clan needs you more now than ever! Use your head and follow Sandstar's orders! Bramblepaw, you can take your claws off him now."

Gingerly she let go, half expecting Leafpaw to dart off into the trees again, but the Windclan apprentice only stood up and shook himself.

Behind them, the elm-killing monster attacked its victim. Thorn-sharp splinters of wood shot through the air, and Bramblepaw felt searing pain as a tiny sliver of bark stabbed into her flank.

"Now!" yowled Sandstar. The cats leaped forward just as the monster tore a branch from the elm, sending it crashing onto the forest floor where the cats had stood a heartbeat before.

Sandstar stopped when they reached the bramble thicket. "Fireheart, take Crowpaw and the rest of your patrol and get the kits, queens, and kings out," he ordered. "Mousefur, take Tornear and Leafpaw with your patrol and find the elders."

Bramblepaw turned to follow her mother, but Sandstar called her back. "Bramblepaw, I need you here!" he commanded. "Blossomfall, you help the apprentices to get out. Riverclan warriors, go with him, please." Blackclaw nodded and darted off with the Thunderclan cat. "Ferncloud, wait at the entrance and make sure everyone escapes. Don't let any cat block the way."

"What about me?" Smokefur demanded as the others charged away.

"I'll get to you soon," Sandstar promised. He turned to Rowanclaw, who was tearing at the ground with her long hooked claws. "You know this part of the forest better than us. We can't go back the

way we came. Which way is the quickest out of here?"

"That way!" Rowanclaw answered at once, nodding to a break in the trees. "If we're quick, we'll get to it before the monsters and pick up a trail that will take us to the tunnel under the Thunderpath."

Sandstar turned back to Smokefur and Tallstar. "You two must defend our escape route," he meowed. It was the least dangerous of all the tasks, and Bramblepaw guessed that her father was trying to preserve the Windclan leader's last life.

Sandstar looked at Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw. "You two, let Rowanclaw take you into the camp. She'll know which den is which. Make sure that no cat remains inside the camp. If you hear me yowl, get out at once. It'll mean the monsters have reached the brambles."

Squirrelflight pressed his muzzle to Bramblepaw's ear. "Are you okay with this?"

"Of course I am! What do you take me for—a kit who's never left the nursery?" Bramblepaw jerked indignantly away. He blinked at her, his eyes glittering with concern, and she realized with a jolt that he was just worried about her. "I'm fine," she promised. "It feels like a battle, and I need to fight for the forest—even if we can't win. We can't let Rowanclaw down."

She whirled around and raced for the camp entrance. Rowanclaw was already scrambling through the prickly tunnel that led into the camp. As Bramblepaw pounded after her into the clearing, the stench of terror nearly stopped her dead in her tracks. Pelts flashed everywhere as the Shadowclan cats bolted in blind panic. Terrified yowls tore through the air as queens and kings called for their kits, and warriors shrieked orders.

Amid the chaos, the newly arrived warriors were somehow managing to stay calm: Bramblepaw spotted Brackenfur and Tornear flanking a group of confused Shadowclan elders to herd them across the clearing; on the far side, Crowpaw urged Runningnose, the old Shadowclan medicine cat, toward the camp entrance.

Blackstar's white coat stood out among the shadows. A gray apprentice crouched beside her, her fur standing on end. "Don't be afraid!" the Shadowclan leader growled, nudging the apprentice to her paws. "I won't let you die."

She began to push the petrified apprentice toward the tunnel. Suddenly a kit squealed from the far end of the clearing. Blackstar turned to look, and Bramblepaw followed her gaze. The tiny scrap of dark brown fur had flattened itself on the ground and screwed its eyes tightly shut.

Blackstar glared at Bramblepaw. "Don't just stand there! Get Smokepaw out while I get that kit!" She shoved the apprentice toward her and headed for the kit.

Smokepaw stared at her, too stunned to speak or move. There was no time for formal introductions. Bramblepaw grasped the scruff of her neck in her teeth and started to haul her across the ground. She pushed her into the tunnel and scanned the clearing. Blackstar had grabbed the kit and was pelting toward her. Bramblepaw darted out of the way just in time to let the Shadowclan leader hurtle past.

She rushed over to the nursery thicket and thrust her head into the nest. Peering into the shadows, she scented the air and listened for mewling above the roaring of the monsters. The nest was empty.

"Is everyone out?" Mothwing stood beside her, pelt bristling.

As Bramblepaw nodded, she heard Hawkfrost call to one of her Clanmates, "We've done enough. Get out now, before the camp is destroyed!"

"We'll stay until every cat is out!" Blackclaw countermanded instantly, her sharp yowl making Hawkfrost freeze in surprise.

"Stop acting like you're in charge!" Mothwing hissed angrily to his sister.

"Maybe not now," Hawkfrost spat back. "But one day!"

Bramblepaw felt a shiver chill her fur, but there was no time to think about it. A tortoiseshell Shadowclan king was struggling to

carry his two kits across the clearing. He kept dropping one and dashing back to fetch the other. Bramblepaw raced over.

"I'll take this one!" she breathed, picking up the tiny bundle in her teeth.

The king flashed her a grateful look, and together they made for the entrance. Ferncloud was waiting outside. Bramblepaw thrust the kit at him and ran back down the tunnel.

The camp was emptying quickly, and the roar of the monsters was deafeningly close. *Make sure that no cat remains inside the camp.* Sandstar's order rang in her ears. She scoured the shadows of the camp wall for cats, terrified that any moment a monster would crash through, but only Squirrelflight, Rowanclaw, and Mothwing were left in the clearing.

"Mothwing, get outside and help Crowpaw check for injuries," Squirrelflight hissed. "We'll search the camp for stragglers."

Mothwing headed for the tunnel. "Hurry!" he called over his shoulder.

Trees were tipping and falling all around the camp, their leafless branches rattling together like dried bones. But Bramblepaw had not heard her father's signal yet, so she had to assume it was safe to stay.

"Is everyone out?" Squirrelflight demanded.

"We need to check the dens again to make sure," Rowanclaw panted.

"I've checked the nursery," Bramblepaw meowed. "It's empty."

"Did Tallpoppy and his kits get out?"

"I helped a king and his kits to the tunnel," Bramblepaw told her.

Squirrelflight flicked his tail. "I'll check the warriors' den." He glanced at Rowanclaw. "You check the apprentices'."

"What about the medicine clearing?" Bramblepaw called to Rowanclaw.

"Littlecloud's gone already."

"But are any sick cats there?" Bramblepaw demanded.

Rowanclaw blinked. "I don't know," she admitted.

"I'll check," Bramblepaw promised. "Where's the entrance?"

"Over there!" Rowanclaw pointed with a flick of her tail to a tangle of thorns beside the warriors' den.

Bramblepaw squeezed her way through the narrow tunnel. It opened into a large den, sheltered from the camp and the forest by a thick covering of hawthorn branches. The den was empty, and she was about to push her way back out when she heard her father's yowl.

"Get out! The monsters have reached the camp!"

She began to struggle through the tunnel, but the brambles clung to her pelt. She thrashed wildly and felt the thorns dig deeper. A tree groaned overhead, its timber cracking as it began to fall. With a deafening crash it smashed into the ground so close to the camp wall that Bramblepaw felt the ground shudder.

Wild with fear, she writhed harder, trying to pull herself free. "Squirrelflight!" she shrieked. "Help!" She expected a tree to crash down on top of her at any moment. Would she be killed trying to help Shadowclan, with no chance to see their new home?

Suddenly Bramblepaw felt strong teeth sink into the scruff of her neck and haul her forward. The thorns raked her flanks like claws, but she did not care. She leaped to her paws. Squirrelflight was staring at her, his sides heaving.

"Thank you!" she breathed. She pressed her muzzle against his, but they weren't safe yet. Another tree groaned overhead, and Bramblepaw looked up to see a shadow loom slowly over the camp. A huge sycamore was tipping toward them, its branches spreading

across the sky as it began to topple.

"Where's Rowanclaw?" she cried.

"I told her to go," Squirrelflight meowed. "Everyone has left but us. Let's get out of here!"

The two cats pelted toward the camp entrance and shot through, almost crashing into Ferncloud, who was waiting outside.

"You're the last," he yowled. "Come on!"

Looking over her shoulder, Bramblepaw saw the sycamore crash down onto the camp, crushing everything beneath its heavy branches. Another of the Clans' camps had been destroyed. The home that Shadowcaln had lived in for uncountable moons was gone.

Ferncloud led them away through the forest. Tallstar and Smokefur were waiting on the path, staring with wide, horrified eyes as the forest fell about them. Sandstar, Crowpaw, and Rowanclaw were with them.

"Hurry!" Smokefur urged. "The others are already heading for the Thunderpath!"

"I thought you hadn't heard my warning!" Sandstar gasped.

"I got stuck," Bramblepaw explained breathlessly.

"Where's Leafpaw?" Squirrelflight asked, looking around.

"Heading for the tunnel." Sandstar flinched as another oak smashed into the ground nearby.

"Did all the queens, kings, and kits get out?" Rowanclaw demanded.

"Blackstar had a kit," Smokefur answered. "And there was a tortoiseshell with two kits..."

"What about Tallpoppy?"

"I thought Tallpoppy was the tortoiseshell!" Bramblepaw gasped.

"Tallpoppy's a light brown tabby!" Rowanclaw's voice rose in panic. "He's got three kits, not two!"

The cats gazed at one another in dismay.

"I thought everyone was out," spat Ferncloud.

"The camp was definitely empty," Bramblepaw panted. "They must have run off into the forest!"

Bramblepaw pricked her ears, listening for the mewling of kits.

"Over there!" Smokefur cried. He pointed with his nose to a clearing surrounded by fragile, pale-barked saplings. They raced over, Bramblepaw scrambling to get a grip on the slippery leaves.

"Hurry!" Tallstar hissed behind her. She felt Squirrelflight nudging her flank. As she struggled to find her footing, a crack sounded above them and a tree smashed down onto the forest floor only tail-lengths ahead, separating them from the others. Bramblepaw gasped and shut her eyes.

"Are you okay?" Squirrelflight demanded.

Blinking, she opened her eyes and saw the tree lying in front of them. Had Crowpaw and the others escaped? She darted forward away from Tallstar and scrambled onto the newly fallen trunk with Squirrelflight beside her.

"They're okay!" she yowled in relief. Rowanclaw and Crowpaw were standing in the clearing with Tallpoppy. Smokefur was trying to round up his three kits, who were darting about in terror, their little tails stuck straight out behind them. Sandstar was at the edge of the clearing, scanning the forest for the best escape route. Looking down, Bramblepaw saw Tallstar squeezing through the branches of the fallen tree and limping quickly over to join the Thunderclan leader.

Through the trees, Bramblepaw could see monsters on all sides, munching steadily closer. Suddenly she heard a terrifyingly familiar

creaking sound. "Look out!" she shrieked.

An ancient birch tree was toppling toward the clearing.

"Save the kits!" Bramblepaw yowled to Sandstar as the tree cast a shadow across his pale ginger pelt. Tallpoppy heard her and grabbed a kit; Rowanclaw picked up another, and, with Crowpaw and Tallstar fast behind, they pelted out of the way. But Smokefur was still diving for the final kit, and Bramblepaw stared in horror as the tree hurtled toward him.

Her heart seemed to stop as the moment stretched into a lifetime. Sandstar leaped forward and hurled himself against Smokefur's flank. Bramblepaw just had time to see the Windclan warrior flung clear, the kit grasped safely between his jaws, before the tree hit the ground with a deafening crash.

"Sandstar! No!" Bramblepaw bounded down from the trunk and pelted over to the fallen tree. Squirrelflight kept pace with her, swerving away toward a gray shape staggering at the edge of the branches.

"Got you!" he cried as he dragged the Windclan warrior and the kit out from where they were tangled in the branch tips.

Crowpaw was stumbling, dazed, from underneath a buckled sapling that had protected her when the tree fell. But there was no sign of Sandstar. A Twoleg howled, and another splinting groan made the air tremble.

"Get out of here!" Squirrelflight screeched.

"I'm not leaving without Sandstar," Bramblepaw cried.

"We'll find him!" Squirrelflight promised. He looked at Smokefur. "Get the others to the Thunderpath!"

The earth shuddered as another tree crashed down behind them.

"We'll wait for you at the tunnel," Smokefur promised.

As the Windclan and Shadowclan cats fled, Bramblepaw ran over to

where Crowpaw was scrambling beneath the branches.

"I can see him!" she cried, clawing desperately at the earth.

Squirrelflight pushed past her, using his head to thrust aside the tangled splinters of wood. Brmablepaw could see her father's pale ginger pelt, slumped beneath a heavy branch. Squirrelflight stretched forward and grasped Sandstar in his jaws. Trembling with effort, he dragged him out and laid him on the leaf-strewn earth.

A shaft of pale sunlight sliced into the clearing and lit up the Thunderclan leader's pale ginger pelt. He lay very still with his eyes closed.

"He's losing a life," Crowpaw whispered.

"Sandstar..." Bramblepaw's tail began to tremble. "Father!" she yowled. Around them, monsters shook the ground, their yellow eyes blazing between the trees.

"We've got to get him out of here!" Squirrelflight hissed.

"We can't risk moving him," Crowpaw warned.

Bramblepaw pressed her belly against the earth. "I'm not leaving without him."

An earsplitting crack exploded above them, and she screwed up her eyes as the forest suddenly went dark. Images flashed through her mind—Fireheart, the old camp, the Tribe of Rushing Water, Feathertail... *Starclan! Don't let me die yet. After everything we've been through, I need to know that the Clan survives!*

"Bramblepaw!" Squirrelflight's call sounded muffled under the fallen branches that covered them. "Where are you?"

Bramblepaw opened her eyes and took a long, shaky breath. The fallen tree was lodged on the trunk of the other, forming a tiny cavern. Squirrelflight's dark ginger pelt was just visible through the twigs. She twitched her tail and flexed her paws one after the other. "I'm okay," she called. Nothing was broken, but her pelt stung where branches had scraped against it. "Squirrelflight, are you hurt?" With

a grunt, she hauled herself toward him and stretched out her head to lick his flank.

"It's all right; I'm fine," Squirrelflight muttered, struggling to sit up. "Can you see your sister anywhere?"

Bramblepaw strained her eyes in the gloom. "Crowpaw?"

"I'm over here," came a voice. Bramblepaw could make out her shape now. She was crouching over Sandstar, protecting his body with her own.

"The kit... is it safe?"

When Bramblepaw heard her father's rasping mew, she wriggled upright, ducking her head under the branches until she could straighten her legs. She felt the blood pulsing through her paws, cold as ice. She forced her way through the twigs until her father's breath wafted against her cheek. His eyes were glazed, but open.

"Did you speak with Starclan?" Crowpaw whispered to him.

"I could hardly see them," Sandstar croaked. "But I know they were there." He lifted his head. "Did Smokefur rescue the kit?"

"Yes, they're both safe." Squirrelflight squeezed through the branches to Bramblepaw's side.

Bramblepaw searched Crowpaw's gaze. "Will Sandstar be okay?"

"He'll be fine," Crowpaw replied. She pressed her nose against Bramblepaw's cheek. "Don't be scared. This was meant to happen."

Bramblepaw felt her heart beating in her throat. "How can we get him out of here?"

"I can walk," Sandstar mewed, hauling himself unsteadily to his paws.

Suddenly a Twoleg howled above them. It sounded so close that Bramblepaw spun around with a snarl. She looked up. A shadow loomed over the branches that covered them.

"We must go now!" Squirrelflight hissed.

The Twoleg was peering down through the tangle of twigs. Crowpaw flattened her belly against the ground, her eyes stretched wide in terror.

"I won't let them catch you again!" Bramblepaw promised. She glanced at Squirrelflight. "Can you get them out if I distract the Twoleg?"

Squirrelflight blinked. "I'm not sure that's safe..." he began.

"I'll be okay," Bramblepaw insisted. "Come on; we don't have much time."

Without waiting, she struggled out from the branches. She could see the Twolegs hind legs in front of her. Giving a loud screech of fury she shot between them, raking the Twoleg's pelt with her claws as she rushed past. She heard it howl and glanced back to see it lumbering after her, away from her Clanmates.

Bramblepaw pelted over the splinter-strewn forest floor. Ahead a monster lifted its claws into the air to bring down another tree. Bramblepaw dodged into a swath of brambles and looked back for her Clanmates. *Starclan, help them!* Then branches of the fallen tree, heading for the far side of the clearing. Squirrelflight ran beside him, and Crowpaw's dark gray pelt flashed behind. As they reached the open ground, where they could be seen more easily, Bramblepaw tipped back her head and yowled. She heard the Twoleg run over and start kicking at the brambles, trying to flush her out. Bramblepaw crawled backward, ducking her head, and yowled again. She had to keep the Twoleg focused on her while the others escaped.

Peering out through the thorns, she saw Squirrelflight glance in her direction, but he kept going until they reached the safety of the standing trees. Bramblepaw straightened up with relief. Wriggling around, she forced her way through the brambles and skirted the edge of the clearing until she reached the path that led to the tunnel. Sandstar, Squirrelflight, and Crowpaw were hurrying toward her.

"You made it!" Crowpaw gasped.

"Keep going!" Squirrelflight hissed.

Bramblepaw fell in beside them. Sandstar staggered, his paws stumbling on the packed earth.

"Don't stop now!" she urged, pressing against him. Squirrelflight flanked his other side, and between them they kept their leader on his paws as they hurried to the safety of the tunnel that led to Thunderclan territory. They had escaped the Twoleg this time—but how much longer would it be before the whole forest was lost to them forever?

Chapter 15

Crowpaw burst out of the tunnel that led under the Thunderpath. Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw followed, with Sandstar stumbling between them. For a moment, the light was blinding, and Crowpaw screwed up her eyes. Then they adjusted to the cold daylight after the shadows in the tunnel, and she looked around at the Shadowclan cats lying exhausted on the narrow strip of grass beside the deserted Thunderpath.

Tallpoppy's kits mewled as they huddled close to their mother. Littlecloud hurried from one cat to another, helpless without any of his supplies, and Blackstar stood staring at her Clan as if she couldn't believe what was happening to them. Her white pelt was stained with blood, and her black paws were pricked with bark and splinters.

Sandstar's voice croaked behind her. "Is everyone okay?"

"You should lie down," Crowpaw urged him. "There are no monsters here."

"We can't stay in the open!" Squirrelflight objected.

"We have to rest before we go on," Crowpaw insisted.

Tallstar limped toward her. "Is Sandstar all right?" she asked hoarsely.

"Yes, but he lost a life when the tree fell," Crowpaw explained.

Tallstar closed her eyes and shuddered all the way to the tip of her long tail.

"I'm taking my warriors home," Blackclaw called from where the Riverclan cats had gathered at the edge of the grassy space.

"Will you help us get Shadowclan to Sunningrocks first?" Sandstar

asked.

"Sunningrocks?" Blackstar narrowed her eyes. "Why do you want to take us there?"

"It's where Thunderclan lives now, and you'll be safe from Twolegs there," Sandstar meowed. "Cinderpelt has herbs for your injured cats, and there's room for you all to rest."

And where else can Shadowclan go? Crowpaw thought grimly. There was hardly a place left in the forest that hadn't been taken over by Twolegs.

"Okay," Blackclaw nodded. "We'll go with you as far as Sunningrocks. But just because you've welcomed Shadowclan onto Thunderclan territory doesn't mean they're welcome in ours."

"We'll be patrolling the border!" Hawkfrost warned, her eyes cold as ice.

Bramblepaw glared at her. "How can you worry about borders at a time like this? When will you realize what our journey meant, for *all* the Clans?"

Squirrelflight silenced her with a glance. "Shadowclan will not cross the border," he promised.

"Of course we won't," snapped Blackstar.

Squirrelflight turned to Crowpaw. "How long before we can leave?"

When Crowpaw hesitated, Sandstar lifted his head. "I'm growing stronger," he insisted. "We can go soon."

"Littlecloud?" she called to the Shadowclan medicine cat. "Can everyone make it to Sunningrocks?"

"I think so, if we travel slowly," the small tabby she-cat replied.

Crowpaw looked up at the sky. The sun was a fiery ball, sinking toward the treetops. "We should try to get back before it's dark," she told Squirrelflight. "Before it's too cold."

"Okay," Squirrelflight mewed. "We'll rest long enough for everyone to catch their breath, then we'll move on."

Thin clouds drifted in front of the sinking sun as the cats trekked through the woods.

"Tallpoppy?" Crowpaw matched her pace to the limping Shadowclan king's. "Are your kits all right?"

Tallpoppy gazed at his three kits, carried now by warriors, and nodded. "Just scratches," he murmured.

"We can clean them and treat them with marigold when we get to Sunningrocks," Crowpaw promised.

Blackclaw padded close beside Tallstar, pressing against the Windclan leader's flank whenever she stumbled. Sorreltail carried one of Tallpoppy's kits, and Tornear followed the Shadowclan apprentices, nudging them gently forward whenever they slowed their step.

"It's as if we don't belong to different Clans anymore," Crowpaw whispered, catching up with Bramblepaw.

Her sister nodded. "This is what it was like on the journey to the sun-drown-place."

But as the cats limped onto the sloping surface of Sunningrocks, the old rifts returned. Shadowclan climbed to the top of the rock, while Riverclan halted beside the trees. Sorreltail placed the kit beside Tallpoppy and rejoined the Thunderclan cats as they padded slowly up the slope. He pressed his tortoiseshell and white flank against Brackenfur's, supporting her as her exhausted paws swayed beneath her. Tallstar lay down close to the base of the rock, too tired to climb any farther. Smokefur, Tornear, and Leafpaw gathered around him.

"How did it go?" Birchpaw rushed over to Cloudtail and pressed her nose into her flank. She drew back quickly. "You're bleeding!"

"Just some scratches," Cloudtail reassured her.

"You're alive!" Cody hurried down from the overhang, with Whitekit stumbling after him. He pressed his muzzle against Crowpaw's.

Dustpelt appeared at the lip of the nursery and stared in bewilderment at the cats crowding onto the rock. "What happened?"

"Everyone's safe." Squirrelflight shouldered his way to the front of the patrol. "That's the main thing."

"Thank Starclan." The Thunderclan queen sighed.

Cinderpelt clambered out of his hollow. "Where's Sandstar?"

"I'm here," Sandstar croaked, weaving his way to the front. Crowpaw followed him closely, aware that he was still shaking.

"Sandstar lost a life," she murmured before Cinderpelt could say anything.

"What about the Shadowclan camp?" Lionheart demanded. "Did you save it?"

"We cannot fight the monsters," Sandstar meowed bleakly. "We could do nothing except help Shadowclan escape before their camp was destroyed."

"They destroyed the camp?" Lionheart gasped.

"There's nothing left but fallen trees," Blackstar growled. "We have no home."

"You'll be safe here for now," Sandstar told the Shadowclan leader.

Blackstar's eyes glimmered with relief for a moment. Then she turned to her medicine cat. "Littlecloud," she meowed. "Do what you can to help your Clanmates."

The small tabby she-cat began to pace quickly around the Shadowclan cats. She leaned down and sniffed Tallpoppy, then began to lick his flank. "There are many splinters here," she mewed, lifting her head.

"Tallstar has a gash on her hind leg," Smokefur added.

Cinderpelt looked at the bloodstained pelt around him. "Fetch everything we have," she told Crowpaw. "We just have to hope it will be enough."

Crowpaw heard pawsteps following her as she hurried to the crevice where they stored their medicine supplies. It was Cody.

"There are so many injuries!" The kittypet's eyes were wide and frightened.

"But we're all still alive," Crowpaw pointed out, reaching down into the gully with her paw. She pulled out the first bundle of herbs she touched. "Can you take out splinters?"

"I can do more than that," Cody answered. "Come on, Whitekit!" he called, and they padded toward a group of Shadowclan kits trembling with fear and cold.

"Is this kittypet a medicine cat?" Blackstar growled.

"It's okay," Crowpaw called out. "He knows what he's doing."

Cody soothed each kit with a reassuring lick, then encouraged Whitekit to distract them while he searched their fur for cuts and splinters.

Crowpaw pushed her paw back into the crevice. She hoped there were enough berries to make poultices for all the cats who needed one. To her surprise she found the hiding place was better stocked than she had expected. She pulled out as much marigold as she could find and reached back in for the berries.

Cinderpelt appeared behind her and nodded when he saw the pile of herbs growing on the rock. "I went back to the ravine while you were away and brought as much as I could carry," he explained. He paused and looked at the mass of Shadowclan cats milling fretfully at the top of the slope, their faces bewildered and frightened. "Help Shadowclan first," he ordered. "There are too many for Littlecloud to manage alone, and I can cope with Tallstar and our own wounded."

"Will Blackstar mind if I help?" Crowpaw asked. The Shadowclan leader sat with her elders, her eyes fixed on Cody as he tackled another kit.

"You persuaded her to let Cody help," Cinderpelt reminded her.

"But he's not a *Thunderclan* cat..." Crowpaw mewed.

Cinderpelt gazed at her through narrowed eyes. "Blackstar's no fool. She knows her cats need our help."

Crowpaw nodded. Summoning up her courage, she padded toward the Shadowclan cats and called to Littlecloud, "Can I help?"

The look in Littlecloud's eyes gave away her relief and gratitude. But before she could reply, Blackstar rounded on Crowpaw, her eyes as hard as the Moonstone. "We can take care of our own cats, thank you."

"But you've already allowed Cody to help, and I have herbs," she offered, forcing herself to sound calm.

"Littlecloud will manage," Blackstar insisted.

Crowpaw shuffled her paws, torn between her duties as a medicine cat and nervous respect for Blackstar's wishes. Then Littlecloud mewed loudly, "Blackstar, we need those herbs."

Blackstar flattened her ears, but Littlecloud held her gaze. "With Crowpaw I can help our Clanmates twice as fast."

Blackstar twitched her ears. "Very well," she growled.

"Can I help too?" Mothwing padded across the rock to join them. "Blackclaw said it would be okay."

"You may as well," Blackstar grunted, turning away.

"Thanks, Mothwing," Crowpaw whispered. She left the bundle of herbs at Mothwing's paws and hurried back to the crevice to fetch more. Cinderpelt was still there and had begun mixing a slave on a dried oak leaf.

"This is ready to use," he muttered through a mouthful of half-crushed berries. "Come back when you need more."

Crowpaw went back and dropped the salve beside Littlecloud, who was examining Runningnose's pelt. "Rub this in after you've pulled out the splinters," she told her. "It'll stop any infection." She gazed around at the Shadowclan cats. "Where would you like me to start?"

"The elders heal slowly, so they should be treated as soon as possible," Littlecloud advised without looking up.

Crowpaw went over to Pebble, who was lying beside Runningnose, her eyes glazed with shock. She nodded politely at her, and when she did not respond, she leaned down and began to lick her flank. The old cat sighed quietly as she pulled out a splinter with her teeth and rubbed in a tiny drop of salve.

Crowpaw worked on one cat after another till her paws ached with tiredness. As the moon began to brighten in the sky, she glanced up the slope toward her father. "Cody, can you take over here?" she asked. "There are only one or two apprentices left, and I want to see how Sandstar is."

"Of course. You go right ahead."

Sandstar was lying beside Fireheart, washing dried blood from between his claws. "How are you?" Crowpaw whispered, touching her muzzle to his.

"I'm fine," he purred, his eyes soft and clear.

"Are you sure?" She searched his face. For all her connection with Starclan, she would never know what it felt like to lose a life. "D-did Starclan tell you we should leave the forest now?"

"They told me only to go back and do what I must to protect my Clan." Sandstar told her. "And that's what I'm going to do."

Crowpaw heard the Riverclan cats gathering on the slope behind her. "We're returning to our camp," Blackclaw announced to Sandstar. "But we know that the time has come to make a decision about leaving the forest."

Crowpaw held her breath. The fate of all four Clans hung like a cobweb, fragile to the gentlest breath of wind.

"I'm sure many of you have noticed that the river is drying up," Blackclaw went on.

Smokefur padded forward. "The Twolegs have changed the course of the water," he meowed. "Our warriors have seen them digging great holes around the gorge to channel the river away."

Blackclaw just blinked at him as if the reason for the disappearance of the river no longer mattered. "Leopardstar told me that if the Shadowclan camp was destroyed, then we must accept that the Twolegs are coming." She held Sandstar's gaze steadily. "Riverclan will leave the forest with the other Clans."

Crowpaw felt her shoulders sag with relief. At last Sandstar would have his wish, and all four Clans would leave together.

Sandstar hauled himself to his paws, his eyes brightening. "Smokefur, tell your Clanmates that Thunderclan and Riverclan will travel with them." He turned his face toward Blackstar. "Will Shadowclan join us?"

Blackstar hesitated, but Sandstar was in no mood to wait for an answer.

"You can't still plan to live among the Twolegs after you have seen what they are capable of?" he hissed.

Blackstar nodded slowly. "Shadowclan will travel with you," she meowed. "After all, we have no home and no territory now."

Sandstar lifted his head to address all the cats on the rock. "We will leave at dawn!"

Mews of approval echoed through the air, and Crowpaw felt a tingle of excitement. Whatever the journey held—wherever they were going—nothing could be worse than to stay in this place with Twolegs and their monsters closing in on all sides. She glanced at Cody, still busy among the Shadowclan cats. Would there be time to escort him home first? Or had he become such a part of the Clan

that he'd go with them?

"Where will we go?" Tornear was the first to ask, but her question echoed around the gathering.

Sandstar looked expectantly at Squirrelflight. The dark ginger warrior looked down at his paws. Bramblepaw, standing beside him, pressed her flank against his. Crowpaw tipped her head to one side, puzzled. They looked like a pair of unprepared apprentices who had just been asked the best way to catch water voles.

"As you know, Midnight's sign never came," Squirrelflight began, dragging the words out as if they were stuck in his throat like thorns. "So we don't know exactly where we should go. But we could head toward the sun-drown-place."

"If there's been no sign before we get there, we could find Midnight again and ask him," Bramblepaw put in.

"How do we get to this sun-drown-place?" Blackstar called.

"We traveled two different routes—" Squirrelflight broke off and looked uncertainly at Bramblepaw.

"And you don't know which one to take?" Sandstar suggested.

"We..." Squirrelflight faltered. "We should head for Highstones first," he meowed at last. "Away from the Twolegs."

"Very well," Sandstar agreed. "We shall meet at the edge of Windclan's territory at dawn."

Blackclaw and Tallstar nodded.

"Then it's decided." Sandstar turned to Blackstar. "It would be easier for us all if Shadowclan would sleep at Sunningrocks tonight," he meowed, choosing his words carefully. "We could make an earlier start if you were to rest here."

Blakcstar seemed to appreciate Sandstar's diplomacy. "Then we will stay," she meowed.

"As if they've got any other place to go!" Brackenfur muttered in Crowpaw's ear.

"But we will sleep apart from Thunderclan, and a guard will be posted," Blackstar warned.

"These cats have just saved your Clan!" Blackclaw exclaimed. "Do you think Thunderclan brought you here only to attack you?"

"Let's hear whether Leopardstar agrees with your plan to leave the forest before you start making judgements on my decisions," Blackstar retorted.

Crowpaw winced. She glanced at her sister, but Bramblepaw was no longer listening. She was staring into the forest, her face filled with anxiety.

Crowpaw padded quietly to her side. "Are you okay?"

"I just hope Starclan sends us a sign soon," Bramblepaw mewed.

"I'm sure they will do what they can."

Bramblepaw stared earnestly into her eyes. "You're right. Even without a sign, I know Starclan will be protecting us and guiding us wherever we go."

Crowpaw blinked. She wished she were that certain. There had been no sign of Starclan when Shadowclan had needed them most. It was only luck—and the other Clans' courage—that had gotten those cats out alive. More and more, it looked as if Starclan was powerless to help, and the cats would have to rely on one another, nothing else, to survive.

Chapter 16 (TW: Animal Death)

Author's Note: Sorry for the late upload! I've had this chapter done since Tuesday but I forgot to upload it. Also the reason for the big delay, I got a new kitten! We've been playing the get along game with my two older cats. Everything is good now. I will work on Chapter 17 and 18 today since those were supposed to be done on Wednesday.

Clouds obscured the night sky as Crowpaw padded down the hard stone slope. A mild breeze promised that there would be no frost tonight, and she could smell rain. Most of the Clan was sleeping; Shadowclan was huddled near the edge of Sunningrocks, as far from the Thunderclan cats as they could be.

Exhaustion dragged at Crowpaw's limbs, but her mind teemed with thoughts, memories of the day's horrors mingled with uncertainties about the journey to come. Knowing she would not be able to sleep, she headed for the forest. Even in leaf-bare, its musty odor and the feeling of the earth beneath her paws soothed her.

As she neared the trees she heard Cody's voice calling to her, "Crowpaw!" The kittypet was sheltering among some brittle fronds of bracken.

"Cody? What are you doing out here?"

"There's something I need to tell you." Cody scraped at the ground with his paw.

Crowpaw stared at him. "What?"

"I'm leaving," Cody mewed simply. "I'm going home."

Crowpaw fought back the urge to cry, *No! Please stay!* She stepped forward and touched her nose to Cody's ear-tip.

"This is no life for me, all this death and blood and uncertainty," Cody went on. "I am happy with my housefolk, and they'll be missing me. I never meant to stay this long, but Whitekit needed me and I began to—"

"You began to enjoy the *freedom,*" Crowpaw interrupted, suddenly desperate to remind her new friend what he would be giving up if he went back to his Twolegs.

"I guess I did," Cody admitted. "But today I saw just how fragile your freedom is. You have to fight for *everything*—for your food, even somewhere to shelter." He shook his head apologetically. "I like to know where I will be sleeping every night, and that there will always be food when my belly grows empty. And I like my housefolk. Not all Twolegs are as bad as the ones destroying your home."

"Would you like me to show you the way through the forest?" Crowpaw offered. "Sandstar promised you an escort."

Cody shook his head. "The woods seem quiet enough," he mewed. "There won't be any monsters at night. Anyway, you'll need to rest for your journey." He glanced back toward Sunningrocks. "Thank Sandstar for me."

Crowpaw pressed her nose sadly against her new friend's cheek. Cody closed his eyes and sighed. Then he straightened up. "I've said goodbye to Whitekit. Dustpelt is eating properly again, and he'll be fine with her now."

"Thanks for taking care of me when we were in the Twoleg nest," Crowpaw whispered. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you, too. And I'll keep an eye out for Silverstream," Cody promised. "If I see him, I'll tell him where you've gone and that his Clan is waiting for him."

Crowpaw felt a warm tongue rasp her ear. "Bye, Crowpaw," Cody murmured. "Good luck."

"Goodbye, Cody." With an aching heart, and half wishing she could

have convinced Cody to stay, Crowpaw watched her friend vanish into the shadows of the forest.

A rustle in the bracken made her jump, and Brackenfur slipped out from the trees. "Has Cody gone home?"

"He said his Twolegs would be missing him," Crowpaw explained.

"I heard." Brackenfur nodded. "Are you okay?"

"Of course." She braced herself for Brackenfur to make a sharp comment about how kittypets didn't belong in the wild, but instead Brackenfur just blinked sympathetically.

"Let's sleep out here tonight," she suggested. "It is our last night in the forest, after all."

The thought of never spending another night under these trees took Crowpaw's breath away, and for a moment she wanted to lie down and bury her face in the leaf-mold and forget that all this was happening. How could they leave if they didn't know where they were going? But she followed Brackenfur into the bracken, and together they flattened a patch into a nest big enough for the two of them. As she settled down, Crowpaw felt Brackenfur's soft tail brush her nose.

"Your Clan is still here," Brackenfur murmured.

"I know." Crowpaw tried not to think of Cody hurrying home through the forest alone.

Before she closed her eyes, she looked up at the branches and gave thanks to Starclan for the shelter they had given Thunderclan in past moons. If only she could be sure there was a home as safe as this had once been waiting for them at the end of their journey.

Cold rain woke Crowpaw, spattering on her fur, and she opened her eyes to a watery, gray dawn. She stretched and shook the raindrops from her pelt. Her movement awoke Brackenfur.

"Brrr," the golden-brown tabby complained, hauling herself to her paws. "What a day for a journey!" She didn't suggest that Sandstar

might delay leaving until the rain stopped. Crowpaw realized bleakly that all of the cats knew they could not stay in the forest a moment longer.

They left their sodden nest and padded to the bottom of Sunningrocks, where the two Clans were beginning to gather. Rowanclaw was sharing tongues with a Shadowclan apprentice, stopping now and then to shake the rain from her ears.

"I wonder what it's like for Rowanclaw, being back with Thunderclan?" Brackenfur whispered, following Crowpaw's gaze.

"Strange, I guess," she murmured.

"It's going to be very wet underpaw." Ashfur's worried mew rose from the Thunderclan warriors and apprentice. The other cats looked anxiously at Squirrelflight, and Crowpaw knew it was not just the rain that was making their pelts bristle. The whole Clan was nervous about the journey ahead.

"Mud or no mud, we will leave as soon as Riverclan comes," Sandstar insisted. "Can't you hear the Twoleg monsters?"

Crowpaw listened, and sure enough, through the drumming of the rain, she heard monsters rumbling behind the trees. She had never heard them this close to Sunningrocks before, and the thought of them bearing down on their final refuge filled her with alarm.

"I want all warriors and apprentices to catch whatever they can before the journey," Sandstar meowed. "We'll share whatever we find with Shadowclan."

"Shadowclan will organize its own hunting patrols!" Blackstar called across the rock.

Crowpaw saw her father's face darken for a moment. "Very well. Our warriors will show you the best places to hunt."

"We can find our own prey," Blackstar growled.

Sandstar curled his lip but said nothing. Instead he turned to Squirrelflight. The young warrior's tail was twitching, and he

kneaded the ground impatiently. "I want you to organize two hunting patrols, Squirrelflight, but don't let any cat go near the Twolegs."

"It sounds as if he's talking to Silverstream!" Mousefur hissed in Crowpaw's ear. "Why doesn't he just name Squirrelflight deputy and be done with it?"

"Because that would be like admitting Silverstream is dead." Ferncloud growled back, overhearing.

Sandstar flicked the rain from his whiskers and turned to Cinderpelt. "Prepare traveling herbs for everyone," he ordered. "Will you have enough?"

"Oh, yes," Cinderpelt answered. "I just hope that wherever we're going has the plants I need to replenish my stocks."

Crowpaw blinked. She hadn't thought about that before. Would their new home have marigold, yarrow, comfrey, and all the other precious plants she had learned to cure with? Her paws trembled at the thought of having to look after the Clan without them, and she took a steadying breath before hurrying over to help mix the herbs they would need for the journey.

Squirrelflight led a hunting patrol into the dripping woods, and Mousefur followed with another. Blackstar watched them disappear into the forest before muttering something to her deputy, Russetfur; a moment later the dark ginger tom, his pelt plastered against his thin body, headed down the slope with several Shadowclan warriors.

Cinderpelt shook his head. "Shadowclan should have joined the Thunderclan patrols," he murmured. "They'll have no idea of the best places to hunt, and with prey so scarce they'll need all the help they can get."

"Why is Blackstar being so stubborn?" Crowpaw mewed.

"Shadowclan has always been proud." Cinderpelt started to take supplies out of the cleft in the rock. "Now that they've been driven

out of their home, pride is all they have left."

"But surely it would be wiser to combine our strengths?" Crowpaw protested. "We have a long, difficult journey ahead."

"The boundaries between the Clans run deep." Cinderpelt reminded her. "Traditions are all we have to cling to."

"Then you agree with Blackstar?" Crowpaw asked in disbelief.

"Of course not, but I understand her," Cinderpelt replied. "Although it is frustrating," he added. "I offered to check on their injured cats when I awoke, but Blackstar sent me away. She told me that Thunderclan had done enough for Shadowclan yesterday, and she didn't intend to make her Clan's debt any greater than it was."

"How can she talk about debts?" Crowpaw exclaimed. "Yesterday the four Clans faced the Twolegs together, and we were all as powerless as Starclan to stop them."

"I know," the medicine cat mewed. "But we're not powerless to find a new future for ourselves, so let's get on with mixing the traveling herbs. Every journey begins with a single pawstep, and this one is up to us."

As the rain fell steadily, they began to combine the bitter herbs that would give the cats strength for the journey. Half-starved for so long, they needed this ancient mixture, handed down from medicine cat to apprentice for countless moons, more than ever before.

When the piles of herbs were complete, Crowpaw remembered she had not told her father about Cody. "Can you spare me for a while?" she asked.

"There's nothing more we can do here," Cinderpelt assured her. "I'll check on Dustpelt." He glanced at the nursery hollow.

Dustpelt was sitting on the edge of the hollow, washing Whitekit. The kit struggled resentfully—looking as normal as any kit ever had—as his mother rasped his ears with her rough tongue. The sight gave Crowpaw a rush of hope. She imagined Whitekit growing up

and training to become a warrior in their new home, and a profound belief that Thunderclan would survive washed over her like sunshine. She quickly covered the traveling herbs with leaves to protect them from the rain and hurried up the slope toward her father.

He was staring across the treetops that stretched beyond Sunningrocks. He sat up straight, despite the pounding rain, with his tail curled over his paws and his ears pricked, scenting the air almost as though he welcomed the prospect of the journey ahead. It was hard to believe he had lost a life only yesterday.

When he heard Crowpaw calling him he turned his head. "Yes?"

"I thought I should let you know Cody went back to his Twolegs last night."

Sandstar nodded.

"I had begun to hope he'd stay," Crowpaw confessed.

"Now is no time for a stranger to join the Clan," Sandstar pointed out gently.

"But he was great with Whitekit!"

"That doesn't make him a Clan cat," he argued. "All the time he was with us, the scents of the forest never drew him from the safety of the camp. He fled here from the wooden nest because that danger was greater than the thought of living with us. I know what kittypets think of the cats who live in the forest. He'll be happier with his housefolk."

Crowpaw was surprised to hear her father use a kittypet word, and wondered if he was thinking of his early days with the Twolegs. Cody had not had time to talk with him about Dottie. Was he thinking of that kittypet friend now?

"You'll miss him, won't you?" he meowed unexpectedly.

"Yes, I will," Crowpaw admitted. "He was a good friend. But he knows we have to go away." She stared down into the forest. "We're

leaving so many familiar things behind," she murmured.

Her father's eyes clouded with sorrow. "Yes. Like Silverstream."

Crowpaw couldn't think of anything to say that would comfort him. However much he wanted to believe that his deputy was still alive, it was still almost impossible that Silverstream could find his way back to them.

"I know we must go," Sandstar went on. "I want to leave as much as any cat, but I can't bear the thought that I might never see him again."

"You don't know that for sure," Crowpaw mewed hopefully. "Cody told me he'd look out for him and tell him where we've gone."

A glimmer of hope sparked in Sandstar's eye, then disappeared. "How will he escape the Twolegs?" he asked bleakly. "And then find our new home...?"

"Are you going to name a new deputy?" she ventured.

"No!" Her father leaped up, and Crowpaw shrank back. "There's no need," he went on quietly. "If there is even the smallest chance he's alive, then Silverstream is still Thunderclan's deputy."

Before Crowpaw could say anything, mews sounded from behind them. The Thunderclan hunting patrols had returned and were carrying fresh-kill up the rock—birds and mice, not many, but enough to allow each cat a small meal. Shadowclan's hunting patrol returned shortly after. They had found only one thrush between them.

"Will you share our catch with them?" Crowpaw mewed to her father.

"Blackstar would be insulted by the offer," Sandstar replied.

"I suppose they can hunt while we travel," Crowpaw suggested.

"Hopefully we all can. There must be more prey out there than here." Sandstar shook himself. "Go and get something to eat," he

ordered. "Riverclan will be here soon."

"Okay." Crowpaw hurried down to where Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw were sharing a chaffinch. They looked drenched, their pelts dark and sodden.

"Want some?" Bramblepaw offered.

"Yes, please." Crowpaw's belly felt hollow, and the scent of fresh-kill made her mouth water. Bramblepaw and Squirrelflight sat back and let her take a bite.

"Do you want to give some to your sister?" Crowpaw asked Squirrelflight. The Shadowclan cats were laboriously passing their meager catch around; each cat took only a small mouthful before pushing it onto the next.

Squirrelflight shook his head. "I wouldn't waste my time."

Crowpaw was startled by the bitterness in his voice.

"We met Rowanclaw while we were out hunting, and Squirrelflight asked if she wanted to hunt with us," Bramblepaw explained. "She told us she was a Shadowclan warrior and would never hunt for another Clan."

"I don't know why she was so superior about it," Squirrelflight growled. "It's as if she's forgotten that she was born a Thunderclan cat, or that we journeyed to the sun-drown-place together."

"It must be difficult for her, being among Thunderclan again," Crowpaw ventured. "She probably feels she has to prove her loyalty to Shadowclan more than ever."

"Crowpaw's right," Bramblepaw meowed. "Don't take it personally, Squirrelflight. It wasn't long ago that you were telling me that your first loyalty is to Thunderclan, not your kin. Allow Rowanclaw to have the same feelings for Shadowclan."

"I suppose so," Squirrelflight agreed grudgingly. "I just wanted to hunt with my sister again." Crowpaw heard the sadness in his voice and thought how hard it must be having a littermate in another

Clan. She glanced at Bramblepaw, grateful that she and her sister shared the same home wherever it was.

"Crowpaw!" Cinderpelt was calling from the den. "Come and help me!"

Crowpaw bounded up the slope.

"Will you take these herbs to the queen and the elders?"

"What about Whitekit?"

"Just give him half a dose."

Crowpaw glanced warily at Blackstar. "Are we sharing with Shadowclan?"

"We'll have some left over," Cinderpelt mewed, his eyes glittering. "I'll offer them to Littlecloud and tell her we have no need for them. Blackstar can take them or leave them as she wants."

Crowpaw admired her mentor's kindheartedness as well as his craftiness: this was an offer Blackstar could accept without losing face. She picked up a bundle of herbs and carried it to Dustpelt. The she-cat accepted the bitter herbs gratefully, though Whitekit was not so thankful.

"It tastes like crow-food!" he complained.

"You've never eaten crow-food," Dustpelt pointed out. "Now just swallow it."

Crowpaw purred with amusement and carried her bundle to where Lionheart, Longtail, and Smallear lay, sheltered by the overhang.

As she put the herbs down, Lionheart shook her head. "Don't waste those on us," she murmured. "We're not going with the Clan."

Crowpaw blinked. "Not going! Why?"

Sandstar trotted over. "What's the matter?"

"Lionheart says they aren't coming with us!"

"We're too old to make such a journey," Smallear rasped. "We'd only hold you back."

Longtail flicked her tail. "And what use would I be? I can't even see where I'm putting my paws!"

"The Clan would help you," Sandstar assured her gently. He looked up at the elderly she-cats. "Just as they would help all of you."

"We know they would," Lionheart mewed. "But Smallear and I are too old for so much change. We'd rather die here beneath Silverpelt, knowing Starclan waits for us."

Crowpaw flinched. Surely Starclan would go wherever they did?

Sandstar nodded gravely. "I cannot force you to come with us, Lionheart," he murmured. "I know your paws are weary. Smallear's too, and you already hear Starclan whispering to you. But Longtail, I won't leave you behind." When the tabby warrior opened her mouth to argue, Sandstar went on, "Yesterday you heard the Windclan cats coming before any other cat. You may have lost your eyes, but your ears and your sense of smell are as good as any warrior's. Please come with us."

Longtail closed her sightless eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath. Then she opened them again, and turned her face toward Sandstar as if she were looking straight at him. "Thank you," she meowed. "I will come."

Brookleap bounded up the rocks. "Sandstar! There is a problem. Riverclan cannot leave today."

Sandstar's ears twitched with alarm. 'Why not?"

"Brightsky is dying. We can't leave him alone."

"We can look after him until Starclan is ready to take him," Smallear agreed.

Brookleap looked at them in surprise. "But he is not one of your

Clan."

"It doesn't matter," Lionheart told him. "We are staying behind anyway. We might as well do what we can for Brightsky."

"The Riverclan camp is a lot more sheltered than this place," Crowpaw mewed. "You will be safe from Twolegs if you keep within the reeds."

"That's true," meowed Sandstar. "We'll bring Lionheart and Smallear to the Riverclan camp, and if Leopardstar agrees, we'll leave them with Brightsky while Riverclan joins us on the journey."

"What's happening?" Blackstar had approached the group.

"Brightsky is dying," Sandstar explained. "We must go to the Riverclan camp before we travel to Windclan's territory."

Blackstar curled her lip. "We'll go ahead and wait for you at the edge of the forest."

A croaking voice sounded behind her, and Crowpaw recognized Runningnose's gray and white pelt. "I would like to say goodbye to Brightsky," mewed the elderly cat. "I've known him since I was an apprentice."

Blackstar looked at the old she-cat, and for the first time Crowpaw saw respect in her eyes. "Of course, Runningnose," she meowed. "You go with Thunderclan. We'll see you again at the edge of the forest."

Sandstar scanned the rock. "Has everyone had traveling herbs?"

"Yes," Cinderpelt replied. "In fact, there are some left. Shadowclan may as well have them. It's not worth carrying them with us." His casual tone gave nothing away.

Crowpaw glanced at Littlecloud, whose tail twitched with excitement. "May we use them, Blackstar?" pleaded the young medicine cat.

"No point letting them go to waste," Blackstar growled, and

Littlecloud began handing out the bundles at once. The Shadowclan leader looked at Longtail, narrowing her eyes. Crowpaw braced herself, expecting her to say that they couldn't take a blind cat on such a long and dangerous journey.

But Blackstar only meowed, 'The blind warrior can travel with us while you go to Riverclan. There's no point taking her across the river and back again. I have warriors who can lead her through the forest."

Sandstar blinked gratefully at the Shadowclan leader. "Thank you." He touched Longtail with the tip of his tail. "Is that alright with you?"

Longtail nodded, and followed Blackstar down the slope to the waiting Shadowclan cats.

"Is every cat ready?" Sandstar called to his own Clan.

Mews of assent sounded from across the rock, and the cats fell in behind Sandstar as he led them down to the shore. The river was hardly more than a trickle, in spite of the ceaseless rain.

"Cinderpelt, Crowpaw, come with me," Sandstar ordered, halting beside the river. Runningnose, Lionheart, and Smallear were already clambering after Brookleap, over the stepping stones. "The rest of the Clan should wait here until we return." he nodded at Squirrelflight, putting him in charge, and followed the elders across the river.

The reeds around the Riverclan camp were brown and brittle, their roots exposed. Crowpaw followed her father into the clearing and flinched as several cats spun around to look at the visitors with hostile surprise.

Leopardstar stood in the entrance to the medicine cats' den, his eyes blazing. 'What are you doing here? Didn't Brookleap give you my message?"

"I did," Brookleap meowed, hurrying to the center of the clearing. "But Sandstar has come to suggest something."

"Lionheart and Smallear are staying behind," Sandstar explained. "They have offered to care for Brightsky."

Leopardstar dipped his head. "That's kind of them," he meowed. "But it won't be necessary. Brightsky is nearly with Starclan."

Crowpaw jumped out of the way as Runningnose wheezed in shock and staggered toward the medicine clearing. Cinderpelt followed, and Crowpaw padded quickly after them, glancing at the riverclan leader as she went past. But Leopardstar let them go without a word.

Mothwing looked up as they entered the clearing. His eyes were clouded with grief. 'There's nothing more any cat can do," he told Cinderpelt. "He's not in pain. I've made sure of that."

Brightsky lay in the middle of the clearing. Rain dripped through the branches onto his matted flank, but he made no attempt to move into a more sheltered spot. Shadepelt, an elderly Riverclan tom, sat beside Brightsky, sadly watching the dying cat.

Runningnose padded forward and touched her nose to Brightsky's shoulder. "Go swiftly to Starclan, my friend. We will look after your Clanmates."

Cinderpelt leaned down and rested his muzzle on Brightsky's pelt. As Crowpaw crouched to bury her nose in his fur, her throat filled with the unmistakable scent of death. Forcing herself not to draw away, she closed her eyes. *At least you can be sure Starclan is waiting for you,* she thought.

With a shuddering gasp, Brightsky drew his last desperate breath; his flank heaved once, then fell still forever as his spirit joined his warrior ancestors.

"He is with Starclan now," Mothwing murmured.

Crowpaw blinked sadly at the unmoving heap of fur. This was one cat who would never see their new home, wherever it lay. How many more cats would not make it to the end of their journey?

Chapter 17

Author's Note: Never mind! Chapter 18 will be worked on tomorrow!

"How will I manage without him?" gasped Mothwing, his eyes huge and scared.

"You'll be fine," Cinderpelt assured him. "And there will be time to grieve, but not now."

Mothwing looked at him for a moment, then nodded and left the medicine clearing to tell his Clan that Brightsky was dead. Crowpaw waited until the Riverclan cats began to pad through the tunnel to pay their final respects, then hurried out into the main clearing.

Mothwing was sitting in the rain with his head bowed, water streaming from his whiskers. "I can't believe he's gone," he mewed.

"He hasn't gone far," Crowpaw comforted him. "He's with Starclan."

"I hope so," Mothwing murmured.

Leopardstar emerged from the medicine clearing and padded over to Sandstar. "Shadepelt and Loudbelly will remain here with your elders," he meowed. "They are too old to travel and wish to sit in vigil for Brightsky."

Sandstar nodded. "We will wait until Riverclan is ready to travel," he murmured.

Hawkfrost and Brookleap padded toward Crowpaw and Mothwing. For once, Hawkfrost's gaze was gentle as she rested her muzzle against her brother's cheek.

"I never thought we'd be leaving anyone behind," Brookleap sighed.

"Neither did I," Crowpaw agreed, gazing at Lionheart and Smallear.

The image of Silverstream staring out from the monster's belly flashed through her mind.

Leopardstar padded to the center of the clearing and looked around. "Is everyone ready?"

"We haven't hunted today," a Riverclan king protested, wrapping his tail protectively around his kit.

"We can hunt on the way," Leopardstar told him.

The moment had arrived. Silently, the cats began to head for the camp entrance. Lionheart and Smallear sat in the clearing watching their Clanmates leave.

"Goodbye, Lionheart," Crowpaw whispered. "Goodbye, Smallear. Good hunting."

"Good hunting," Lionheart replied.

Crowpaw looked up at the gray sky crisscrossed by leaf-bare branches. The rain spattered on her face, and she blinked away the drops that clung to her eyelashes. It was as if Starclan wept to see their Clans leave the forest. Bleakly, Crowpaw wondered if their ancestors would travel with them, or whether this was a final farewell.

"Come on." Sandstar's voice sounded softly in her ear. "The Clan will be waiting for us."

The trek through the forest was hard going, the rain making the leaves slippery underpaw. The Riverclan cats stayed together, keeping up with Thunderclan but traveling separately. Brackenfur fell into step beside Crowpaw and nudged her up each time she stumbled. As they neared the edge of the forest, where there was a narrow strip of Riverclan territory before the moorland began, Crowpaw scented Shadowclan cats. She lifted her head and saw them huddled under the trees, wet and shivering.

"We thought you'd never get here," Blackstar complained, shaking the water from her coat.

The Shadowclan cats paced impatiently around her. They were not comfortable under the trees that had once belonged to Thunderclan; even Rowanclaw looked eager to leave. But Crowpaw longed to linger here, suddenly unable to bear the thought of saying goodbye to the forest for the last time.

Sandstar gazed at his Clan. "We must say goodbye to all we have known," he meowed.

Crowpaw felt Brackenfur's pelt pressing against hers, and she noticed Bramblepaw draw closer to Squirrelflight.

"I want to go home!" one of Tallpoppy's kits mewled up at his mother and his eyes stretched wide.

"We are going home," Tallpoppy promised, his ears twitching. "Our new home."

As he spoke, a tawny-colored cat emerged from the trees a little way off. Even though the rain masked his scent, Crowpaw recognized the stranger at once. It was Alexander.

Mothwing recognized him too, because he bounded over and rolled onto his belly like a kit. Hawkfrost padded after her brother more slowly, the tip of her tail flicking from side to side. The Riverclan cats watched them go with patient acceptance, but Crowpaw saw bewilderment in the eyes of the Thunderclan cats who did not know who Alexander was, and open hostility from the Shadowclan cats.

"What's he doing here?" Bramblepaw whispered.

"Perhaps he knows we're leaving," Crowpaw guessed.

"But why did he come?"

Alexander finished greeting his kits and padded toward the watching cats. Ashfur hissed threateningly, but Sandstar silenced her with a look.

"I didn't think we'd see you again," Leopardstar meowed, dipping his head to Alexander.

"Nor I you," Alexander admitted. "I have come to ask Hawkfrost and Mothwing to leave Riverclan and come with me. I've seen what the Twolegs are doing to your homes. It is no longer safe for them to stay with you."

Mothwing looked down at his paws and Crowpaw's heart skipped a beat. *Could he really be thinking about leaving?* She brushed past Alexander and faced the Riverclan medicine cat. "I know things have been tough lately, but you wouldn't really go, would you?"

Mothwing blinked. "I-I don't know..."

"Your Clan needs you," Crowpaw protested. She rounded on Hawkfrost. "You wouldn't abandon your Clanmates, would you?"

"The decision is theirs." Sandstar's voice rose above the sound of the falling rain. "But I agree they should remain with their Clan."

Alexander narrowed his eyes. "You want them to stay?" Suddenly the wind dropped, and every cat seemed to hold their breath as he went on, "In spite of the fact that Goldenstar was their father?"

Crowpaw scanned the shocked faces of the Riverclan cats. They obviously didn't know that Goldenstar was Hawkfrost and Mothwing's father, even though his kits had been raised in their Clan.

There was a long pause while Sandstar held Alexander's gaze. "I want them to stay *because* Goldenstar was their father," he meowed. Squirrelflight sank his claws into the mud, and Bramblepaw's eyes stretched even wider. "Goldenstar was a great warrior, and these cats have proved they have inherited his courage," Sandstar went on. "Their Clan needs them now more than ever." He turned his gaze on Squirrelflight and Rowanclaw. "Goldenstar's children have earned their place in their Clans many times over."

There were no secrets now. Every cat knew that Goldenstar lived on in four cats, and that three Clans nurtured part of his legacy. Mothwing lifted his gaze, searching the faces of his Clanmates. Hawkfrost raised her chin as if she didn't care what they thought.

Leopardstar nodded. "Sandstar is right. Riverclan needs all our warriors, and we certainly need our medicine cat."

"But they're Goldenstar's kits!" Dawnflower's hiss startled Crowpaw. The Riverclan king was staring at Leopardstar as if he'd just invited a fox to join them.

Bramblepaw's eyes blazed. "So what? That doesn't mean they can't be loyal!"

"Hawkfrost is one of our best warriors," Brookleap added. He looked around at his Clanmates. "Have any of you ever doubted her loyalty?"

"Never," Blackclaw murmured.

Leopardstar looked at Hawkfrost and Mothwing. "Will you stay?"

"Of course," Hawkfrost answered at once. "I would never desert my Clan." She was staring at her Clanmates, her eyes glittering defiantly.

Crowpaw felt her tail quiver. Was it ambition or loyalty that fueled her decision? She glanced at Squirrelflight. How could two warriors with the same father be so different?

Mothwing glanced at his father, his ears twitching. "I have to stay with my Clan too," he mewed. "I'm their medicine cat now. They need me."

Alexander nodded. "Very well." He swept his gaze over them. "Sandstar is right," he murmured. "I see your father in both of you."

Crowpaw heard a low growl come from Dawnflower.

Alexander turned to the Riverclan king. "Goldenstar never knew about these kits, but he would have been proud of them." He glanced around the Riverclan cats. "You're lucky to have them."

He padded back to Hawkfrost and Mothwing, brushing his pelt against theirs. "I wish you well on your journey," he meowed. Then he turned and padded into the forest. The ferns quivered where he

had disappeared, and the Clan cats stared after him in silence.

Chapter 18

"Look!" Rainwhisker yowled, making the cats jump. At the top of the rise that marked the beginning of Windclan territory, silhouetted against the gray sky, stood Windclan. They lined the crest of the hill like stones, waiting.

"Let's go," Blackstar ordered.

She plunged out of the shelter of the trees and hurried up the muddy slope, followed by her Clanmates. Bramblepaw stared sadly at the forest, sinking her claws into the familiar rain-softened earth. All the Riverclan and Thunderclan cats lingered at the edge of the trees, as though leaving was harder than they ever imagined.

"This is no longer our home," Sandstar reminded them gently. "Home is waiting for us at the end of our journey." He began to pad away, lowering his head against the driving rain.

Bramblepaw joined the other cats as they poured slowly out of the forest after him. Beside her, Sorreltail arched his back against the bracken fronds, brushing his scent on their dripping tips one last time.

"We thought you'd changed your mind," Mudclaw growled as the three Clans neared the top of the slope.

"Brightsky was dying," Leopardstar explained. "We waited until he had gone to join Starclan."

Tallstar sat shivering beside her warriors. Her ribs stuck out like gnarled twigs. As the Clan reached the top of the rise, she stood up, wincing at the stiffness in her limbs. "I'm sorry to hear about Brightsky," she meowed.

"At least he died beneath Silverpelt, which is more than we will," muttered Blackstar.

Her words sent a shiver of unease down Bramblepaw's spine. "We saw Silverpelt at the sun-drown-place," she objected. "Starclan will be waiting for us when we arrive."

Mudclaw's tail twitched. "You saw stars, but were they our warrior ancestors or someone else's?"

Bramblepaw blinked, thinking of the Tribe of Endless Hunting who watched over the mountains. What if Mudclaw was right, and they were leaving Starclan behind as well as their homes?

Blackstar clawed the muddy ground. "Are we going or not?"

"We're ready," Tallstar replied.

The moorland that stretched ahead of them was unrecognizable, all the grass swept away to reveal bare, rutted earth.

Leopardstar stared across the broken ground. "Are there many monsters?"

"Too many," Tallstar growled.

As the cats scrambled over the first stretch of exposed ground, Bramblepaw soon began to struggle. The mud sucked at her paws, and her legs felt stone-heavy with exhaustion.

Squirrelflight clawed his way back to join her. "Come on, you can make it."

"It's okay," she snapped. "I can manage."

He blinked. "I know you can," he meowed, and Bramblepaw wished she hadn't been so harsh.

Ferncloud was behind them, carrying Whitekit in his jaws. Brightheart struggled to his side. His pelt was streaked with mud, only his back kept clean by the relentless rain. "I'll take the kit," he offered. He took Whitekit from Ferncloud's jaws, trying not to let the swaying bundle drag in the mud. Ferncloud nodded his thanks and plunged down a muddy ridge to help Dustpelt, who was fighting to stay on her paws.

Leafpaw was carrying a kit too. He looked on the verge of collapse, but his paws kept moving, his eyes fixed on the ground in front of him.

Bramblepaw heard the rumble of Twoleg monsters ahead, and their stench reached her even through the rain. She lifted her face, raindrops stinging her eyes, and saw Twolegs cluttering the horizon. "How will we get past?" she gasped.

"Can we go around?" Sandstar yowled to Mudclaw.

"They're everywhere on the moor," Smokefur called back. "This is the quietest place to cross, I promise."

A monster with huge round paws and gleaming teeth roared across the landscape, while another churned up earth in its wake. Just beyond them, a small rocky outcrop rose from the mud.

"If we can make it that far, we'll be safe for a while," Mudclaw advised. "The Twoleg monsters can't climb those."

But they can crush them if they want, Bramblepaw thought, remembering the Great Rock.

"You're right; it could be our only chance. Let's wait for those two monsters to pass and make a run for it," Sandstar glanced at the other leaders, who each nodded their approval.

Bramblepaw pressed her belly deeper into the mud, feeling the cold earth seep through her fur and drench her skin. Cinderpelt crouched beside Tallstar, pushing a pawful of herbs toward her. *The last of the traveling herbs, to give her strength,* Bramblepaw guessed.

As soon as the monsters rumbled past, Sandstar gave the command to run.

The Thunderclan cats rushed forward. Bramblepaw staggered blindly through the mud, keeping her eyes fixed on Squirrelflight's dark ginger pelt. As long as he was in sight, she felt she would be safe. By the time she reached the rocks, she was panting with fear and exhaustion. Squirrelflight reached down and hauled her onto the ledge, where the others had already gathered. Sandstar wove

among them, his pale ginger fur turned brown by the mud. His eyes were fixed on the cats still struggling toward the outcrop.

Leafpaw reached the rock and held up the kit for Smokefur to take before scrambling after it. Bramblepaw heard a Twoleg shouting and turned to see it running unsteadily across the mud, waving its arms. It had seen the cats still heading for the rocks. Rowanclaw was among them, trying to drag a Riverclan apprentice out of the mud.

"Blackstar and Leopardstar must have hesitated before giving the order to run!" Bramblepaw hissed.

The monsters were turning now, steering their paws toward the straggling cats.

"They'll never make it to the rocks in time!" Squirrelflight gasped.

"We must go back and help them!" Sandstar yowled.

Desperation drove every scrap or tiredness from Bramblepaw's body, and she leaped back down into the mud. Sandstar flashed ahead of her. She felt Squirrelflight's pelt brush hers and then she spotted Leafpaw, pelting toward the Riverclan cats.

The monster's roar made Bramblepaw's ears ring. She hurled herself among the Riverclan cats, reaching for an apprentice who was desperately trying to free herself from the mud. She plunged her teeth into her scruff to haul her out, and she raced away toward the rock.

"Thanks!"

Bramblepaw looked up to see Brookleap watching her. He blinked gratefully and turned to yank another apprentice to its paws.

"My kit!" Dawnflower's screech made Bramblepaw spin around. One kit lay at the Riverclan king's paws. Another was racing panic-stricken straight toward a monster, too scared to see where she was going.

"I'll get her!" Leafpaw lunged forward and grasped the kit in his

jaws. Mud sprayed from his paws as he skidded back toward the outcrop.

Bramblepaw scooped up the other kit and gave Dawnflower a fierce nudge. "Quick!" she hissed.

She reached the rock and bounded up, finding a shadowy crevice out of sight of the Twolegs. She fled along the gully with the kit swinging in her jaws until she emerged on the other side. Dawnflower shot out behind her, followed by Sandstar and a stream of Riverclan cats, and finally Leafpaw emerged with the other kit. Dawnflower raced over and gratefully took the kit from him.

Bramblepaw placed the other kit at his paws and looked around for her sister. "Crowpaw!" she called.

She was crouching beside Tallstar. The Windclan leader's flanks heaved and her eyes looked wild with fear. "Hunted in my own territory!" she wheezed.

Crowpaw looked up when she heard Bramblepaw's call.

"Can you look at these kits?" Bramblepaw asked. Crowpaw glanced uncertainly at Tallstar, but Cinderpelt appeared beside her.

"I'll look after her," he murmured.

Crowpaw hurried over and sniffed each kit. She pressed her ear against the chest of one and then the other. "They're just scared and tired," she concluded. "They'll be fine."

"Of course I'm fine," squeaked one of the kits, a pale gray tabby male. "That monster was never going to catch *us*."

"Hush, Willowkit," soothed Dawnflower. As he bent to wash the mud from the kits' faces, the Shadowclan cats emerged from the gully.

"Is every cat with you?" Sandstar called to Blackstar.

Blackstar nodded, too breathless to speak.

The Clans rested on the rocks for a moment, but another swath of churned up moorland still lay between them and the grassy slope that led down to the meadows, and the Twolegs would be looking out for them by now. It wasn't safe to linger too long near the monsters.

"We should stay closer together," Sandstar suggested. "Travel like a single Clan."

"And who will give the orders?" Leopardstar demanded. "You?"

Sandstar shook his head. "That's not important. I only meant it would be less dangerous if we were to stick together."

"You have no idea where we're going," Blackstar argued. "We have to trust the cats who've made this journey already, and each Clan has one of those. We can travel separately."

"But you fell behind just now," Sandstar pointed out. "Riverclan, too. We must stick closer together, at least while we're near the Twolegs."

Blackstar narrowed her eyes. "Closer together, yes," she conceded. "But each Clan should follow its own leader's orders."

Bramblepaw's paws pricked with frustration. Fighting a bone-weariness that made her head spin, she gazed across the stretch of land between the rocky outcrop and the edge of the moor. There were yet more monsters in the distance, lumbering up and down like terrifying border patrols.

Squirrelflight padded up to her. "I've spoken to the others." His voice was low, and Bramblepaw understood that by "others," he meant Rowanclaw, Leafpaw, and Brookleap. "We've agreed to keep to the outside," he explained. "That way we can look out for trouble and help any cat who falls behind. Leafpaw and I will stay at the back. Brookleap will lead. You take one side, and Rowanclaw will take the other." Bramblepaw nodded. "We've brought them this far —we have a responsibility to protect them," he added, his eyes darkening with worry.

Bramblepaw twined her tail with his. "We've done the right thing," she whispered. "I'm still sure of that."

"Are we ready?" Sandstar yowled.

Slowly the cats gathered on the brink of the rocks, huddling close to their Clanmates. Only Squirrelflight, Leafpaw, Bramblepaw, Brookleap, and Rowanclaw slipped away from their Clans to take up positions at the edge of the group. Blackstar gave the order to move first, but Leopardstar, Sandstar, and Mudclaw quickly followed, and the cats began to leap down from the reassuringly hard surface of the outcrop and back into the slippery mud.

They crept toward the monsters that guarded the edge of Windclan's territory, keeping low and quiet. Bramblepaw skirted one edge of the group, keeping her ears pricked for any unexpected Twoleg activity, as well as looking out for any cats falling behind.

Crowpaw fell in beside her. "Is everything okay?"

"I think so," Bramblepaw murmured.

"I mean are *you* okay?" Crowpaw persisted. "You don't have to protect all of us, you know. We made our own decisions to come on this journey."

Bramblepaw blinked gratefully at her. "I know."

As the Clans neared the monsters they slowed down, crouching so low that Bramblepaw felt she had almost turned into a lump of mud. At least with the cats this filthy, they blended into the earth around them. The monsters were far away to one side and showed no sign of straying back here yet.

"There's mud in my eye!" Whitekit squealed.

"Hush!" snapped Dustpelt, and Whitekit fell silent.

Bramblepaw's heart pounded. Only a few more fox-lengths and they would reach the crest of the slope that would take them away from this mud and the monsters. Suddenly she heard a sound that turned her blood to ice. A dog howled from somewhere near the monsters,

and when she lifted her head to look, she saw it pelting toward them, its ears flapping and its giant paws leaping over the mud.

"Dog!" yowled Leopardstar.

"Run!" Blackstar commanded.

Bramblepaw stared around in panic. There was no way the kits and leaders could outrun a dog! As the other cats pelted forward, Sandstar and the other leaders raced among their Clans yowling orders.

"Pick up the kits!" Sandstar commanded.

"Help the elders!" hissed Leopardstar.

Bramblepaw looked for Whitekit, but Rainwhisker had already scooped him up and was racing for the top of the slope. Dustpelt hurtled after her, but Bramblepaw could hear the terrifying howls of the dog getting closer. The huge creature bounded easily over the rutted ground, bearing down on the cats even faster than the monsters had done. Already the elders were falling behind, even though the other cats urged them forward with desperate yowls and nudges.

Bramblepaw glanced back to find out where Squirrelflight was, and with a jolt of horror she watched him spin around and head straight toward the dog. Leafpaw and Rowanclaw raced beside him, hardly recognizable under the slick of mud that clung to their pelts. What were they doing?

Stunned, Bramblepaw watched them charge toward the vicious snarling dog, and only when they got near did she understand what they were doing. Spreading out on Squirrelflight's hissed command, they surrounded the great black hound; at once the creature slowed down, swinging its massive head from side to side as it figured out which cat to choose. Then it fixed its eyes on Leafpaw and headed straight for the scrawny pale brown tabby apprentice. Instantly Leafpaw swerved toward Rowanclaw, his paws sliding in the mud. Rowanclaw shot past him in the other direction, yowling abuse at the dog as she dodged its snapping jaws. The dog hesitated,

snarling, then set off after the Shadowclan warrior. Bramblepaw's heart pounded with terror as she saw it gaining on her, but Squirrelflight was already racing up behind the dog. He raked its hind legs and swerved nimbly away as the dog spun around and gave chase.

The Twolegs had heard the commotion and one ran toward the dog, howling as Squirrelflight fled a fox-length ahead of the creature's glistening fangs. Leafpaw had turned and was running for the dog again, hurtling past its nose and bringing it to a bewildered halt. The dog gazed around, its eyes gleaming with fury. Leafpaw spun on his hind legs and raced back again. The dog lashed out, its jaws snapping close to Leafpaw's flank. The Twoleg howled again and leaned forward, reaching out with its paw.

Bramblepaw's breath stopped in her throat. *Don't let the Twoleg catch you!* she silently begged Leafpaw. They couldn't lose another cat this way! Then the Twoleg's paw closed around the dog-s collar and dragged it away. Bramblepaw felt dizzy with relief.

Leafpaw tore away from the Twoleg with Rowanclaw and Squirrelflight on his tail. "Run!" he screeched as he streaked toward Bramblepaw. She spun around and raced after her Clanmates. Most of them had reached the top of the rise and were pelting down the other side. Bramblepaw checked to see if any cat needed help, but the last elders, two Shadowclan cats weak with fear, were being half dragged, half pushed to safety by Russetfur and Brookleap. Bramblepaw followed them as they stumbled over the crest of the hill and fled down the slope.

Not until she was halfway down did she realize that she had crossed the Windclan border and left Clan territory for the very last time. The scent markers had been washed away by the mud and the rain and the stench of the monsters.

Bramblepaw forced herself not to look back. They had left their homes. The journey had truly begun.

Chapter 19

Author's Note: Hello everyone! This is going to be an announcement. Since this book only has 6 chapters left, I plan to finish them this week! There is a reason for this, I go on winter break next week for 2 weeks! This means I will be taking a small break from writing this series. I will return with Starlight on January 8th! This also means I will have a new schedule for January-May. This is my last semester of college which also means once I graduate, I will lose my job. Uploads will be wonky during the summer until I figure out a proper schedule. That is all, enjoy the chapter!

Like cloud shadows drifting over the ground, the Clans trekked in silence across a meadow. Bramblepaw was grateful that Squirrelflight walked close beside her, shielding her from the icy wind. The rain was easing now, but the clouds had been raked into tatters by a thorn-sharp breeze that promised colder weather. Shivering, she looked up and saw a Twoleg nest looming ahead, even bigger than the Great Rock.

Her paws were sore from the prickly stubble that seemed to cover all the fields they had passed through, and she longed for the softness of leaves underpaw. The air was filled with unfamiliar scents—Twolegs, the monsters that prowled the crisscrossing Thunderpaths, the fresh scent of dog drifting from a Twoleg nest, and the recent scent of rogues. Bramblepaw felt the instinctive tension of any cat that strayed from its territory, even though she was surrounded by more Clan cats than she had seen before in her life. She scanned the hedgerow, and her heart seemed to stop beating altogether when she saw the brown beech leaves rustle madly, shaken by more than just the wind.

Patchpaw stepped out from her hiding place like a shadow coming

to life, and stared at the Clans in surprise. A second cat slipped out of the hedge behind her. Bramblepaw recognized the black pelt of Raven, the cat who had allowed Patchpaw to share her home in a Twoleg barn for many moons.

"Sandstar! Is that you?" Patchpaw's ears twitched as she called out for her old friend. The Clan cats halted and stared at her. Every cat knew about the black and white Thunderclan apprentice who had been driven out by her mentor, Goldenstar. Even if they hadn't known her during her short time in the forest, many had met her on the journey to Highstones.

"Hello, Patchpaw." Tallstar dipped her head in greeting.

"Patchpaw!" Sandstar pushed through the other cats to greet his old friend.

"Sandstar!" Patchpaw touched noses with the Thunderclan leader. She looked around. "Where's Silverstream?"

Sandstar blinked. "Silverstream's not with us."

"Is he dead?" Patchpaw's pelt bristled in shock.

Sandstar shook his head. "Twolegs captured him."

"Twolegs?" Patchpaw echoed. "Why?"

"They started trapping us." Sandstar's mew was raw with grief. "We've been forced to leave the forest."

"*What?*" Patchpaw lifted her nose to scent the air. "Is that Windclan and Riverclan with you? And Shadowclan?"

"The Twolegs are destroying all our homes," Sandstar explained. "We would have been crushed by their monsters if we'd stayed, if we didn't starve first."

"You look half-starved already," Raven remarked, coming forward.

"Hello, Raven," Sandstar greeted her. "How's the hunting?"

"Better for me than for you, by the looks of it," came her blunt reply.

"Where are you heading?" Patchpaw asked.

"Highstones first, and then..." Sandstar turned to look questioningly at Squirrelflight, but Squirrelflight just gazed back in silence.

"You'll stay with us tonight, won't you?" Patchpaw asked. "The hunting is good this moon. The barn is full of rats sheltering from the cold."

"Wait, Patchpaw," warned Raven. "This many cats will never fit into the barn. The Twolegs would have a fit when they came to get straw for the cows."

"That's true," Patchpaw said. "But there must be a way to help."

"I suppose they could stay at the broken nest," Raven suggested.

"Of course!" Patchpaw turned to Sandstar. "You know the place—where you sheltered with Oakstar after the rat attack?"

Sandstar glanced up at the reddening clouds. "I was hoping we'd make it to Highstones by tonight."

"We can't turn down the offer of food," Blackstar argued.

Sandstar dipped his head. "You're right." He turned back to Patchpaw. "Thank you."

"Let's get you settled; then we can show the warriors the best places to hunt," Patchpaw mewed. "There'll be plenty for every cat."

Bramblepaw heard murmurs of excitement ripple through the Clans, and the kits began to mewl their hunger out loud now that it seemed there was a chance they would be fed.

"We need a rest and a meal more than you can imagine," Sandstar meowed.

Patchpaw gazed at her friend's mud-stained pelt. "Oh, Sandstar," she

murmured, "I think I can imagine."

The broken Twoleg place had no roof, but now the rain had stopped, its stone walls were enough to shelter the cats from the wind.

"I recognize this," whispered Deadfoot, a Windclan queen. "We slept here when Sandstar led us back home, after Brokenstar drove us out."

"I didn't think we'd ever see this place again," Webfoot growled.

The kits and elders streamed gratefully into the nest, glad of the chance to lie down. Patchpaw and Raven led the warriors away to hunt, while the apprentices, Bramblepaw and Leafpaw among them, stayed to guard the others. Cinderpelt and Crowpaw padded among the cats to check that none had been hurt in the desperate scramble across the moor.

"Bramblepaw?" Crowpaw called. "Can you fetch some of that rain-soaked moss from outside? Some of the queens, kings, and elders are too tired to walk that far."

Bramblepaw nodded and hurried away to pull pawfuls of sodden moss from the ancient stones that formed the walls of the shelter.

The cats took it from her eagerly, lapping at the water that they squeezed out with their forepaws. When the last Windclan elder had drunk his fill, Bramblepaw decided she could settle down and rest her aching paws. As she made herself comfortable in a corner, the warriors returned, carrying fresh-kill. Warm, delicious scents filled the shelter, and Bramblepaw felt a quiver of joy as Squirrelflight dropped a plump rat in front of her.

"Do you want to share?" she offered.

"No," Squirrelflight mewed. "It's all yours."

Bramblepaw's belly ached by the time she had finished because she was unused to such a huge meal, but this sort of discomfort was far less frightening than hunger, and for the first time since returning to the forest, she felt warm and well fed.

"This is a good place to rest," Tallpoppy purred. "I don't think my kits could take another night in the open. They nearly froze in last night's rain."

"They'll be warm enough tonight," Dustpelt agreed.

It was dark when Squirrelflight returned. He settled down beside Bramblepaw with a piece of fresh-kill as big as the one he'd given her.

Sandstar was lying next to Fireheart, their tails, pale ginger and flame-colored, curled together. "Will you rest with us tonight?" he mewed to Patchpaw, who was watching the cats eat from the entrance to the nest.

"Yes, I'd like that." She padded over to the corner where Thunderclan had gathered. Shadowclan huddled opposite, while Riverclan and Windclan settled in separate corners.

"I never thought I'd sleep among the Clan again," Patchpaw murmured.

"I just wish it weren't under these circumstances." Sandstar sighed.

Patchpaw's eyes darkened. "How will you find a new home?"

"Starclan will tell us," Bramblepaw mewed. She glanced at Squirrelflight, but he didn't look up. "Won't they?" She looked at Crowpaw, uncertainty pricking at her paws. Crowpaw dipped her head, but said nothing.

When Bramblepaw woke, cold sunlight streamed into the nest. She flexed her claws, wondering how late it was. She had slept soundly. Looking up, she saw her father standing on a fallen stone that made a natural platform in the center of the broken nest. All around him, cats were drowsily lifting their heads and blinking in the daylight.

"We've slept too long," Sandstar mewed. "It's sunhigh. We must push on to Highstones. Wherever we're going, we have a long journey ahead of us."

Mudclaw got to her paws, a stubborn expression on her face. "Why

must we leave a place that has such good hunting?"

"My kits have fed well for the first time in moons!" Tallpoppy put in.

"This is a prey-rich place," Tallstar agreed. The Windclan leader looked tired and drawn despite their long sleep.

"Patchpaw only invited us to stay the night," Sandstar argued.

"So? What could he do if we decided to stay longer?" Blackstar stared defiantly at Patchpaw. "My Clan needs food and shelter, and they will take it by force if necessary."

Squirrelflight stood up. "This is not the place for us," he meowed. "I don't know exactly where we're going, but I know it's not here."

Bramblepaw nodded. "Why would Starclan have made us journey all the way to the sun-drown-place if they only meant for us to make our homes here? We wouldn't need a sign for that."

Leafpaw twitched his ears. "We must finish the journey we've started," he growled.

"I agree," meowed Brookleap from the Riverclan corner.

"Me too." Rowanclaw stretched, arching her back. "We must carry on."

"I think they're right," Leopardstar meowed unexpectedly. 'There are too many Twolegs around here. What if one of their dogs got loose? We'd be trapped in a place like this."

Blackstar narrowed her eyes. "Very well," she muttered.

Tallpoppy reluctantly got to his paws, nudging his kits awake. "Come on, my dears," he whispered. "We're leaving."

"But it's warm here," mewled one.

"And there's fresh-kill," squeaked another.

"We must go anyway," Tallpoppy told them. His voice was dull with tiredness, and Bramblepaw felt a jolt of sympathy for the brave Shadowclan king. He padded toward the entrance, and his kits followed, their fur sticking up in clumps where they had slept on it.

"I'll come with you to Highstones," Patchpaw offered, brushing her tail against Sandstar's flank.

The cats filed silently away from the shelter, heading for the crags of Highstones that towered in the distance, dark against the clearing sky. Bramblepaw shivered as the wind ruffled her fur. Sunhigh was already past. If they slowed their pace to match the elders and kits, they would not reach Highstones until the sun had dipped below the horizon.

"So who is Thunderclan's deputy now?" she heard Patchpaw ask Sandstar.

Bramblepaw glanced at Squirrelflight, but he kept his eyes fixed straight ahead.

"Silverstream is," Sandstar growled.

Patchpaw stared at her friend in surprise. "But he's gone."

Sandstar rounded on her, his eyes glittering with pain. "Isn't it enough that we've had to leave our home? Don't ask me to give up on my friend as well. I know he would never give up on me." He started to trudge on again. "Thunderclan has a deputy, and there is no need to choose a new one."

Highstones was cast in blue-black shade as the sun sank low in the sky. The cats had seemed to take forever struggling up the steep, stony slope on paws already raw from the day's traveling. Now they lay exhausted outside Mothermouth. Bramblepaw stared into the great black tunnel that led to the Moonstone. The Clan leaders and their medicine cats had disappeared into it as soon as they had arrived.

"I wish you'd gone with them," Bramblepaw muttered to her sister. "You could have told me what Starclan said."

"Leopardstar said this wasn't a time for apprentices, and Sandstar agreed with him," Crowpaw mewed.

"Do you think Starclan will tell them anything?"

"Who knows?" murmured Crowpaw.

There was the sound of loose stones crunching beneath paws, and Sandstar padded out of the tunnel, followed by Tallstar, Leopardstar, and Blackstar. Their faces gave nothing away as they separated to join their Clans.

"I want to know what happened!" Bramblepaw fretted.

"They can't tell us anything about the ceremony," Crowpaw reminded her.

Bramblepaw felt a prickle of frustration. It was all right for Crowpaw; she had her own special connection with Starclan. Couldn't she help out the cats who didn't?

"Bramblepaw!" Squirrelflight called. The dark ginger warrior was weaving his way toward her. "We're meeting up there!" he whispered. He nodded to the crest of the ridge. "We have to decide where we're going next."

Bramblepaw put her head on one side. "I thought we were going to the sun-drown place to find Midnight."

"This is our last chance to be sure it's the right thing to do," Squirrelflight replied. "After this, we'll be taking our Clanmates into territory where they've never been before. Come on."

Bramblepaw followed him up the steep slope, away from the rest of the Clans. She could see Brookleap hurrying to the top of the ridge from the Riverclan cats, his brown tabby pelt glowing in the moonlight. Rowanclaw and Leafpaw already sat on top of the ragged spine of rocks, silhouetted against the star-clad indigo sky.

The shadowy world stretched away on the other side of Highstones, a huge black expanse that made Bramblepaw's breath catch in her throat. Out there were snow capped mountains, strange cats,

dangerous creatures, and the sun-drown-place, that endless stretch of water where Midnight lived. Bramblepaw shivered. *Oh, Starclan, what are we doing?*

"Does everyone agree we should head for the sun-drown-place and find Midnight?" Squirrelflight asked.

Rowanclaw's eyes were round with worry. "I can't think of what else we should do, but what if he's not there anymore?"

"It's a long and dangerous journey," Brookleap agreed.

"I was so sure we were going to lead them to a safe new home," Bramblepaw meowed, remembering her excitement as she carried Midnight's message back from the sun-drown-place. "We were going to save them."

"And instead we might be leading them into unnecessary danger," Squirrelflight murmured.

"Why couldn't Starclan have chosen different cats to carry this message?" Brookleap sighed.

Bramblepaw's heart ached for him. He had lost so much. His brother had died on the first journey, and now Twolegs had taken his father. She moved closer to him, pressing her flank against his.

"Do you think our ancestors have abandoned us?" Rowanclaw mewed, voicing the fear that nagged at them all.

"Well, they haven't sent the sign Midnight promised," Squirrelflight admitted. "Have any of you seen a dying warrior?"

"Perhaps it was Brightsky?" Brookleap suggested.

"He was a medicine cat," Bramblepaw pointed out.

"Would Midnight know the difference?" murmured Rowanclaw.

The cats looked at one another in silence.

"But Brightsky died on Riverclan territory!" A sickening pang of

doubt suddenly twisted Bramblepaw's belly. "If Brightsky's death was the sign, then we've come the wrong way!"

The five cats stared at one another, their eyes filled with dread as they imagined telling their leaders that they had to take the Clans all the way back into the heart of the forest to face the monsters once more.

Oh, Starclan, have we gotten it all wrong? Bramblepaw lifted her face to the sky and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, a flash of movement caught her attention. She gasped, and the other cats followed her gaze. Above them, a falling star blazed a silvery trail before disappearing in a flash of light.

"The dying warrior!" Bramblepaw breathed. It was the sign they had been waiting for, one of Starclan's own warriors scorching into nothingness to show them the way to go. Faint as cobwebs, the star's fiery trail hung in the sky, stretching toward the horizon where the jagged peaks of the mountains jutted into the sky.

"Now we know which way to go," Squirrelflight murmured.

"Over the mountains," meowed Bramblepaw.

Chapter 20

Crowpaw pushed closer against Cinderpelt as the chill of dawn dragged her awake. The stone beneath her seemed to have soaked all the warmth for her body, and the air was so cold that when she opened her eyes she could see her breath billowing in small clouds. She stood up and stretched. The rocks glittered with frost in the pale dawn light, and a scent drifted up toward her so delicious it made her mouth water. Patchpaw was padding up the slope with a freshly killed rabbit dangling from her jaws.

The other Thunderclan cats were still sleeping, clustered in a dip in the rock several fox-lengths away from where each of the other Clans had settled for the night. But the scent of the rabbit woke them, and they began to raise their heads as Patchpaw wove among them. Sandstar was already stretching, Fireheart at his side, when Patchpaw dropped the fresh-kill at the Thunderclan leader's paws.

"A parting gift," she mewed.

Sandstar stared at her. "I wish you'd come with us," he meowed. "I've lost Silverstream; I don't want to leave another friend behind."

Patchpaw shook her head. "My home is here, but I'll never forget you, I promise. I'll be waiting for you always."

Crowpaw wondered with a pang if they would ever come back. She knew they were going to be traveling a long way, but she had no idea how far.

"We have been through so much together," Sandstar murmured, his eyes gleaming as he remembered. "We've seen the death of Oakstar, the defeat of Goldenstar..." He sighed. "So much has happened, like water flowing past in a river."

"More water will flow before we join Starclan," Patchpaw assured him. "This is not the end. It's the beginning. You will need the courage of a lion to face this journey."

"It's hard to find courage when so much is lost." Sandstar's eyes clouded. "I never thought I'd leave the forest! Even when Bloodclan came, I would have died to save my home."

Patchpaw drew her tail gently along Sandstar's flank. "If I see Silverstream, I'll tell him which way you've gone," she promised. She dipped her head formally. "Goodbye, Sandstar, and good luck."

"Goodbye, Patchpaw."

As the black and white loner bounded away down the slope, Crowpaw's heart ached for her father. He was leaving behind his two oldest and closest friends—without even knowing if one of them was still alive. She watched Fireheart press her cheek against his as if to remind him he was not alone.

Cinderpelt stretched his forelegs one after the other. "We should check the cats and make sure they are all ready for the journey ahead," he meowed to Crowpaw.

Crowpaw nodded. She thought back to the night before when Bramblepaw had returned with the others from the top of the ridge. Their eyes had been shining.

"We've seen the dying warrior!" Squirrelflight's mew had been breathless with excitement.

"You've had the sign?" Sandstar leaped to his paws from where he had been dozing beside Fireheart.

"How can you be sure?" Cinderpelt asked.

"A star blazed through the sky, then vanished," Bramblepaw explained. "It fell behind the mountains."

Blackstar ran over from where Shadowclan huddled on the rock. She looked puzzled. "Is this the sign we waited for at the Great Rock?"

Rowanclaw stared at her as if something had only just dawned on her. "Of course! This must be the great rock Midnight meant! Highstones, not the rock at Fourtrees!"

Brookleap nodded. "He's never been to the forest. What he saw obviously looked like a great rock, even though to us it meant something completely different."

Leopardstar shouldered his way to the front. "So what lies behind the mountains?"

"Mountains?" Dustpelt drew Whitekit close to her.

"Last time we crossed them we found the sun-drown-place," Squirrelflight explained. "But this time the star seemed to fall farther along."

Hawkfrost narrowed her eyes. "So we'll have to find a new route?"

"Not exactly," Squirrelflight told her.

"It'll be safer if we cross the mountains the same way as we did last time," Rowanclaw mewed. "Otherwise we risk getting lost—and the snow might come at any time."

"We can head toward where the star fell once we're over them," Bramblepaw put in.

Crowpaw saw her sister's whiskers twitch, and Squirrelflight flexed his claws on the rock as if he were bracing himself for the journey. But there was a haunted look in their eyes as well. They were frightened of what lay ahead, because they knew what the journey might hold. With a twinge of alarm, Crowpaw wondered why Starclan had chosen a *dying* warrior to show them the way. It seemed a dark omen on which to fix the hopes of the Clans.

"Come on, Crowpaw!" Cinderpelt's voice jolted her back to the frosty morning.

"Cinderpelt," Crowpaw meowed hesitantly. "Do you think the sign from Starclan means they're coming with us?"

The dark gray medicine cat gave her a long, thoughtful look. "I hope so."

"But you're not sure?" Crowpaw guessed.

Cinderpelt glanced around. No cat was near. "When we went to the Moonstone yesterday, I could hardly hear Starclan," he admitted.

"But did they say anything?" Crowpaw asked, alarmed.

Cinderpelt narrowed his eyes. "I know that they spoke to me, but I couldn't tell what they were saying. It was as if their voices were drowned by the roaring of a great wind."

"You couldn't make out anything?"

"Nothing." Cinderpelt closed his eyes for a moment. "But they were there."

"They must be suffering as much as we are," Crowpaw murmured. "It must be terrible to watch the forest being destroyed, and to be powerless to stop it. After all, it was once their home too."

Cinderpelt nodded. "You're right. But like us, they will recover, as long as all five Clans remain."

"But will they find us in our new home?" Crowpaw fretted. "Will they know where to look for us?"

"These are questions we cannot answer." Cinderpelt straightened up, and his voice became brisk. "Come on. Our Clanmates need us."

Crowpaw padded to where Patchpaw had left the rabbit. It lay untouched beside her father. A patrol of warriors had already left to find more.

"May I take this to Dustpelt and Whitekit?" she asked, but Sandstar seemed lost in thought.

"Of course," meowed Fireheart.

Crowpaw glanced anxiously up at her mother. "Will he be okay?"

Sandstar turned to face her. "Of course I will," he meowed. "Go ahead and take that to Dustpelt."

Crowpaw picked up the rabbit and hurried to where Dustpelt was curled around Whitekit. The white kit was shivering with cold, and Dustpelt was licking him fiercely to warm him up.

"It's too cold to be sleeping outside!" Dustpelt complained when Crowpaw appeared. "I hardly get a moment's rest." She gazed at Whitekit, her eyes glittering with fear, and Crowpaw guessed she had dreaded closing her eyes in case she woke up to find the last of her kits dead.

"Here." She dropped the rabbit on the ground. "This should help."

Dustpelt's eyes lit up. Flashing a grateful glance at Crowpaw, she tore off a hind leg and placed it in front of Whitekit. "Try this," she urged him. "We used to eat rabbit all the time, but we haven't tasted it in moons."

"Make sure you have some too," Crowpaw advised Dustpelt.

"I will," Dustpelt promised.

Crowpaw's belly growled, and she hoped the hunting patrol would return soon. She looked around to see if any of the other cats looked as though they needed help, but most of them were moving about quite cheerfully, shaking the stiffness from their limbs and padding to the rocks to lap water from the tiny hollows. Several cats, Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw among them, were sitting near the top of the ridge, the gray stone turned rosy by the sunrise.

Crowpaw heard Birchpaw pestering Squirrelflight. "Tell us what it was like. Please!"

Squirrelflight glanced over his shoulder at the far side of the ridge. "You'll find out for yourself soon enough."

"But if you told us, we'd be ready for anything!" Spiderpaw pointed out.

"She's right," Birchpaw mewed. "You've got to prepare us."

Squirrelflight drew his tail over his paws with a resigned sigh. "Well, there are lots of sheep, which are fluffy white woolly things that look a bit like clouds on legs. They're harmless, but you'll need to watch out for dogs when you see them, because the Twolegs use them to control the sheep. And Thunderpaths, of course—they're mostly small, but there are many to cross. And then there are the mountains..."

His voice trailed away, and Crowpaw felt the cold wind pierce her fur. What was it about the mountains that frightened these cats so much? How would they get kits and elders through such a place? *Oh, Starclan, where are you?* If only she could believe Starclan was traveling with them, perhaps she wouldn't feel so afraid.

Crowpaw had never guessed such a vast world existed beyond Highstones. Field after field stretched before them, dotted with sheep, looking exactly like clouds, as Squirrelflight had described. Bramblepaw padded beside her, her breath billowing into the frosty air.

"Do you remember this?" Crowpaw asked.

"A bit," Bramblepaw mewed.

"So we're going the right way?"

"Yes."

Crowpaw wondered why her sister seemed so reluctant to talk. She watched her exchange an anxious glance with Squirrelflight. He had been weaving among the cats all morning, flanking first one side, then the other, as if he was afraid of losing one.

Crowpaw felt the air tremble, and a rumbling in the distance made her pause. It sounded as if a storm was coming, but the clear sky told her there couldn't be. She lifted her nose and sniffed the air. A Thunderpath.

"It's a big one," Bramblepaw warned.

As they drew nearer, the rumbling grew to a roar, and the stench began to burn Crowpaw's throat. The cats in front slowed down,

jostling together but still keeping closer to their Clanmates than the other cats. Bramblepaw pushed forward, and Crowpaw followed until they reached a ditch with steeply sloping sides. Beyond it lay the Thunderpath.

"We should get the kits across first." Sandstar led the way into the narrow gully. Crowpaw jumped down beside Brackenfur, her paws slipping on the greasy grass. Monsters roared past in both directions, and she flinched as the earth shook beneath her paws.

"Each Clan should take its own chances," Mudclaw insisted.

"Riverclan will cross first," Hawkfrost declared.

"Not all the warriors are as strong as Riverclan's," Leopardstar pointed out. "Sandstar is right; we should help the weaker Clans."

"My Clan doesn't need your help!" hissed Mudclaw. "Besides, it would be chaos! No cat would know whose orders to follow!"

"Then why don't you command us all?" Sandstar spat.

"No cat commands Shadowclan warriors except me!" Blackstar growled.

Squirrelflight pushed through the crowd to stand beside Sandstar. Crowpaw was close enough to scent the fear in him. "Cats will get killed while you're all bickering! Surely it doesn't matter who is in charge until every cat is safely on the other side?"

Blackstar flattened her ears and Hawkfrost lashed her tail.

"Let him continue," Sandstar warned.

"I'll lead Thunderclan," Squirrelflight meowed. "Leafpaw can lead Windclan, Rowanclaw can take Shadowclan, and Brookleap, you guide Riverclan."

"Leafpaw can't lead Windclan," Mudclaw argued. "He's only an apprentice."

"Have you crossed this path before?" Squirrelflight demanded.

"No," Mudclaw spat. "But I have commanded my Clan before!"

"Leafpaw will lead!" Squirrelflight hissed.

Ignoring them both, Brookleap flicked his tail and led his Clanmates to the edge of the Thunderpath, where he crouched, waiting to give the signal. A monster roared past, its pelt glittering in the sunlight. As soon as it had gone, Brookleap yowled and the Riverclan cats surged up and over the Thunderpath. Crowpaw searched for Dawnflower, quickly spotting his pale gray coat and feeling a rush of relief when she saw that two Riverclan warriors were helping to carry his kits.

As the cats bundled onto the verge on the other side, Crowpaw heard a menacing rumble of another monster. Thanking Starclan that Riverclan had all made it safely, she looked up to see how far away it was. Her heart flipped over. Mudclaw had told her Clan to start crossing without waiting for Leafpaw to give the command!

Leafpaw stared panic-stricken as the monster screamed toward them. "Hurry!" He bolted forward, scooped up a kit, and raced for the other side. Hurling the kit onto the verge, he raced back to grab another. "Carry the kits!" he ordered. Scrambling to get a grip on the slippery surface, he grasped another kit by its scruff and raced for the far side once more. The warriors and apprentices seized the last of the kits and raced after him, with the queens and kings at their heels. But Cloudrunner, a Windclan elder, fell behind.

"Run!" Crowpaw yowled.

Above her, Sandstar crouched at the edge of the Thunderpath. His gaze flicked at the oncoming monster, judging whether he could reach Cloudrunner in time.

"Stay where you are!" Squirrelflight screeched at him.

Sandstar crouched lower and flattened his ears. "Keep going! You'll make it!" he called to the Windclan she-cat. The monster bore down like a whirlwind and suddenly veered across the Thunderpath, straight toward Sandstar. Crowpaw felt a wave of terror and shut her eyes, waiting for the sickening crunch of fur and bone.

It never came. She opened her eyes a tiny slit to see the monster sweep past Sandstar so close that the wind tugged at his fur. It roared away without slowing down. Crowpaw opened her eyes fully. Cloudrunner was limping determinedly across the Thunderpath, watched by her Clanmates from the other side. Sandstar backed away from the edge, his flanks heaving.

"It's okay, he's safe," Brackenfur touched her nose to Crowpaw's shoulder.

"I thought he was going to be killed," she whispered.

"Your father's brave," Brackenfur murmured, "but he's no fool."

Crowpaw turned back to watch Shadowclan waiting to cross. She hoped that Blackstar had learned caution from Mudclaw's recklessness. The Shadowclan leader was watching Rowanclaw.

An apprentice darted forward.

"Get back!" Rowanclaw hissed. Her tone stopped the apprentice in her tracks, and she darted back to join the other cats.

"We go together!" she insisted, glancing at Blackstar. She nodded.

There were no monsters in sight. Cautiously Blackstar padded forward, lifting her nose to scent the air. "Now!" she called, and the Shadowclan cats leaped up the side of the ditch and spilled onto the Thunderpath. Tallpoppy's kits were carried safely by warriors, and Tallpoppy himself was swept along by his Clan like a fish swimming downstream. Crowpaw sighed with relief as all the cats reached the other side just before a monster set the earth trembling once more.

"We'll go after this one," Squirrelflight called.

Suddenly a tiny cry came from the far side. Crowpaw stiffened. One of Tallpoppy's kits had wandered back onto the Thunderpath! Dazed, it wandered in a circle on the hard path, mewling for its father.

Ferncloud and Mousefur flattened their bellies to the ground, ready to make a dash for the kit.

"Wait!" Squirrelflight ordered. "It's too dangerous."

The Clan held its position.

Tallpoppy began to struggle through the mass of Shadowclan cats to reach his kit, but one of the Riverclan kings was closer. Dawnflower leaped onto the Thunderpath and scooped the kit out of the way of the monster. He carried it back to the verge, dropped it on the grass, and began licking it roughly.

Suddenly he stopped and swiped his tongue around his lips in confusion as he realized the kit was not his own. He glanced self-consciously at his Clanmates as Tallpoppy bounded over and snatched up his kit. Crowpaw tensed, hoping Tallpoppy wasn't offended by the Riverclan king's intervention. But his eyes were brimming with gratitude, and he dipped his head to Dawnflower before carrying his kit away.

"That's where Feathertail rescued me from the fence stuff." Bramblepaw pointed with her nose to the shiny prickly thread that hung between the wooden posts. The Thunderpath was behind them now, and Crowpaw's paws had finally stopped shaking. She was grateful to her sister for distracting her with stories of her first journey here. "While the others were busy arguing about what to do," Bramblepaw went on, "Feathertail rubbed my fur with some chewed up dock leaves and I slipped out like a fish."

"You left half your pelt behind, though," Brookleap reminded her, and Bramblepaw swatted him playfully with her forepaw in reply.

There seemed to be no danger here, no fresh scents of Twolegs or dogs; just lots of sheep that grazed noisily, paying little attention to the cats. The cats spread out across the meadow, each Clan keeping to itself. Only Leafpaw, Rowanclaw, Squirrelflight, Bramblepaw, and Brookleap broke away from their Clanmates, taking turns hurrying up and down the line, watching for stragglers.

Tallstar trekked wearily along. Smokefur had not left her side all day. The other leaders glanced at the elderly Windclan cat from time to time, clearly worried.

"We should find a place to rest," Barkface advised as the sky darkened and a chill breeze ruffled the cats' fur.

"There's a copse up ahead," Sandstar meowed. "We could find shelter there."

The other leaders nodded, and the cats climbed to the top of the sloping field and padded into the wood. Crowpaw sank gratefully onto a pile of moss.

"I smell fox," Blackstar warned.

"The scent is stale," Leopardstar observed, scenting the air.

"But it might come back while we're sleeping," Mudclaw meowed.

"The Clans should all sleep together," called Dawnflower, reaching out with his tail to stop his tom-kit, a plump, round-faced black kit, from wandering after a woodlouse. "Lie down, Tumblekit," he scolded.

"The kits, kings, and queens, should sleep in the center," Smokefur suggested. "They'll be safest there." He glanced at Tallstar. "The oldest cats should join them."

"Very well," Blackstar agreed. "Each Clan will post two guards to keep watch."

Crowpaw padded over to Brackenfur, grateful for the shelter of the bracken. Dustpelt should sleep soundly tonight, she decided, with four Clans and thick undergrowth to keep Whitekit warm. The woods were very quiet, the frosty silence broken only by the hooting of an owl. It wasn't home, and the jumbled scents of four different Clans made Crowpaw's nose twitch, but she felt safe enough to curl up next to Cinderpelt and go to sleep.

Crowpaw slowly grew used to dealing with Thunderpaths as they trekked toward the setting sun. The Clans still crossed separately, but the queens watched out for each other's kits now, having seen how easily the youngest cats were confused by the noise and the stench of the monsters. Like cobwebs in the rain, the Clan boundaries were beginning to dissolve.

"We should reach the mountains this evening," Squirrelflight announced as Crowpaw did her morning rounds of the Clan, checking for injuries or signs of infection.

"Are we that close?" She stared up at the peaks, which had grown from a tiny line on the horizon into a forbidding mass of stone. She shivered at the sight of the snow that capped the highest crags. Some of the cats had already begun coughing, awakening Crowpaw's fear of greencough, the illness that could wipe out an entire Clan in leaf-bare.

"Crowpaw!" Sandstar called. "Are you up for a little hunting?"

"Yes, please," she replied eagerly. She had been so busy tending to the Clan, padding cuts with cobweb, soothing scratches with dock, trying to make the best of what herbs she and Cinderpelt had found along the way, that she had not hunted in days.

"Go with Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw, then," Sandstar ordered. "See if you can bring back a mouse or two."

Bramblepaw bounded to her side. "Which way shall we go?"

"There should be plenty of mice in that field over there." Squirrelflight pointed with his tail to an open meadow beyond the hedgerow.

"Come on then," Bramblepaw urged.

Squirrelflight charged after her, and Crowpaw followed, wriggling through the hedge to find herself in a broad, grassy space.

While Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw ranged around the edge of the field, she headed into the long grass battered down by the leaf-bare winds and rain. Almost at once she smelled a mouse. After the long, hungry moons in the prey-scarce forest they had left behind, Crowpaw could not believe her luck. Crouching down, she prowled through the grass until she found the freshest trail. A moment later she spotted a twitch of brown scrambling deep in the grass, and pounced.

The mouse darted away before her paws hit the ground, and she

only flattened the tussock where it had been sitting a heartbeat before.

"I see you're more accustomed to forest hunting." Hawkfrost's condescending mew made Crowpaw jump. She spun around to find the Riverclan warrior calmly watching her, her tail curled over her paws.

"Haven't you got anything better to do?" she challenged her. "Like hunting for your own Clan?"

"I've already caught three mice and a thrush," she meowed. "I think I have earned a rest."

As Crowpaw searched for a sharp reply, Hawkfrost lifted her nose and scented the air. 'Dog!" she hissed. "Heading this way."

Crowpaw could hear the heavy pawsteps now, pounding through the grass. She stared around in terror, wondering which way to run.

"Get back to the hedge!" Hawkfrost commanded.

Crowpaw began to run, but an angry snarl made her freeze. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Hawkfrost arching her back at a snarling black and white dog. The Riverclan warrior let out a hiss and leaped back, lashing out to rake her claws across the dog's snout.

"Squirrelflight! Bramblepaw! Help!" Crowpaw yowled.

The dog lunged again; Hawkfrost sprang out of the way, but the dog turned in an instant and snapped at the air where Hawkfrost had been.

"Look out!" Squirrelflight burst out of the grass beside Crowpaw and leaped onto the back of the dog. He clung on with piercing claws as it bucked and howled and struggled to shake him off. Squirrelflight hung on, but the dog twisted its head back and clamped its jaws shut only a mouse-length from Squirrelflight's face. Hissing in terror, Squirrelflight let go and was hurled to the ground. In the heartbeat it took him to recover, the dog had rounded on him, slavering with rage.

Just in time, Hawkfrost threw herself in front of Squirrelflight, aiming a flurry of thorn-sharp swipes at the dog's muzzle. Squirrelflight scrambled to his paws and joined the attack. Crowpaw stood stiff-legged with horror, watching the two warriors turn and move and lunch their massive shoulders as though one were a reflection of the other.

The dog began to back away with its tail clamped between its legs. Hawkfrost reared up on her hind legs and hissed so menacingly that the dog yelped and ran for the hedge.

"Squirrelflight, are you all right?" Crowpaw gasped.

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Good job I was here to save you," Hawkfrost sneered.

"I saved *you,* in case you've forgotten," Squirrelflight retorted.

Hawkfrost shrugged. "I suppose you did," she admitted ungraciously.

"Well, I guess you scared that mutt off pretty well," Squirrelflight conceded.

"What's going on?" Bramblepaw hurried out of the long grass. "I smell dog."

"It attacked us. Squirrelflight and Hawkfrost scared it away," Crowpaw reported.

"You're kidding!" gasped Bramblepaw.

"I'm going back now," Hawkfrost announced abruptly. Their narrow escape didn't seem to have made her any friendlier, and Crowpaw was quite happy to see the Riverclan warrior stalk away.

"Come on; let's keep hunting," meowed Squirrelflight. He bounded off through the grass.

"Come on, Crowpaw!" Bramblepaw called over her shoulder. "You'll need to eat well before we head into the mountains."

Crowpaw looked up at the snow-dappled peaks. She wished she shared her sister's courage. The Clans had struggled enough getting this far—how would the kits and elders cope with rocks and ice, and sheer, dizzying cliffs? How would the warriors and apprentices cope, for that matter? She shut her eyes and uttered a silent prayer to Starclan, but she felt hollow with dread as her words came echoing emptily back, as if there were no one there to listen.

Chapter 21 (TW: Animal Death)

A bitter wind blew down from the mountains as the Clans joined the trail that led into the towering peaks. Heavy clouds blanketed the sky, and Crowpaw could tell by their yellow tinge that it would soon start snowing.

Squirrelflight and Brookleap were leading them along the side of a steep valley. It was as different from the forest as Crowpaw could possibly imagine. There were only a few trees, gnarled and stunted, clinging to the smooth gray stone, with nowhere that prey might live. Moons of desperate hunger had left the Windclan cats' fur thin and useless against the chill, but they plodded grimly on with their heads down. Tallstar looked as brittle as a lead, often leaning on Smokefur, who rarely strayed from his side. Shadowclan looked little better, their eyes weary and their pace slow, and Riverclan appeared shabby, their gleaming coats nothing but a memory, half-forgotten, like the days when every cat had enough to eat.

One of Tallpoppy's kits gazed up at the crags with eyes as wide as an owl's. "Are we really going up there?"

"Yes," Tallpoppy answered bleakly.

Cloudrunner paused, then stiffly lifted one paw and grazed her tongue across its pad.

"Are you all right?" Crowpaw asked the elderly she-cat. Blood welled between Cloudrunner's claws. Crowpaw looked farther up the line, where Bramblepaw and Squirrelflight padded side by side. "Bramblepaw!"

Bramblepaw turned at once.

"Can we stop? I need to dress Cloudrunner's paw."

"I'll tell Sandstar," came the reply.

"Is there anything you need?" Squirrelflight meowed.

"Cobweb and comfrey, if possible." Crowpaw gazed at the barren landscape with little hope of finding anything that would help.

Sorreltail, in the middle of the stream of cats, lifted his head. "We'll find some," he promised. He murmured to the cats around him. Mews rippled through the throng, and warriors of all Clans began to range out and search among the rocks.

Crowpaw examined Cloudrunner's paw. "You've kept it clean," she mewed. "But if you go on softening it with your tongue, it'll never toughen."

Barkface pushed her way forward to join them. "What's wrong?"

"It's just raw from walking," Cloudrunner muttered.

"Will this do?" Russetfur came over and spat a mouthful of leaves on the ground.

Crowpaw sniffed them cautiously. They didn't smell like anything she was used to. She lapped up a leaf, letting its flavor seep into her tongue before she dared bite it. The taste was bitter, but it had an astringent flavor that reminded her of marigold. "It might do." She glanced at Barkface. "Should we try it?"

Barkface sniffed a leaf. "It looks a little like something we used on the moors."

"You may as well try," Cloudrunner offered. "If it works, you can use it on others. I'll let you know soon enough if it hurts too much."

Crowpaw chewed the leaf and washed its green juice into Cloudrunner's paw.

The old cat winced and Crowpaw drew back. "It's okay," Cloudrunner grunted. "Just a sting. Carry on."

Mothwing bounded up, one forepaw swathed in sticky, white web.

"Great, thanks!" Carefully, Crowpaw teased the web from his

outstretched paw and wrapped as much as she could around Cloudrunner's swollen pad. "Let me know if it starts to throb."

"I will." Cloudrunner pressed her paw gingerly to the ground. "Not bad," she mewed.

Squirrelflight hurried back to the head of the line, and the cats set off again. Bramblepaw walked quietly beside Crowpaw, her head down.

"Is this the way you came home?" Crowpaw mewed after a while.

"I... I think so," Bramblepaw mumbled.

Crowpaw glanced at her in surprise. They had come this way because Rowanclaw said it would be easier to follow the route they'd used before. She had assumed Bramblepaw knew the way. She peered ahead to where the valley narrowed until it was little more than a cleft between the rocks. "Doesn't anything look familiar?"

Bramblepaw blinked. "It looks different coming in this direction. The Tribe led us most of the way last time."

Crowpaw gulped. She wondered if they would meet any of the Tribe cats on their journey, these mud-streaked cats who worshiped strange ancestors and survived in a world of rock and ice.

As the Clans trekked on, higher and higher, only Brookleap looked comfortable. He leaped from rock to rock so easily he seemed quite unlike a Riverclan cat, and even his fur blended smoothly into the bare gray world.

There seemed to be no end to the climbing, neither that day nor the next. The terrain grew steeper and rockier, but still the peaks towered above them. Cloudrunner's paw had improved, and Crowpaw kept an eye out for more stocks of the herb she'd used to heal it.

"Are you sure we're going the right way?" Brackenfur whispered. "This path is getting really narrow."

She was right. The trail was leading them onto a ledge that spiraled around a dizzying gorge. The mountain fell away at one side of the path and rose up vertically on the other. The wind funneled through the gap like water through a ditch, tugging at Crowpaw's fur. She narrowed her eyes against the icy blast and kept her gaze fixed firmly ahead.

The cats fell into single file to pick their way along the ledge.

"Carry the kits!" Blackstar called down the line, and her yowl echoed eerily off the walls of the gorge.

The ledge followed the curve of the mountain, sloping up toward a narrow pass between two peaks. The mountain side echoed with the rattle of stones as the edge of the path crumbled beneath the cats' paws and sent grit showering down into the shadows below. Crowpaw walked as close as she could to the rock face, her heart hammering. She could feel Brackenfur's warm breath behind her.

Suddenly a wail rang out from up ahead, and a large chunk of rock clattered endlessly down into the abyss. A hole yawned in the narrow path, sending Smokepaw, a Shadowclan apprentice, plummeting into nothingness. For a moment she clutched desperately at the ledge, her claws scratching against the stone. Russetfur, the Shadowclan deputy, lunged to grab her, but his extra weight only dislodged more stones, and the edge where Smokepaw clung suddenly dropped away. Russetfur leaped backward, only just managing to save himself. The apprentice fell, twisting violently in the air, and disappeared into the darkness.

A Shadowclan king leaned over the precipice. "Smokepaw!"

"Get back!" Brookleap yowled. He wove like a fish back along the ledge and dragged him back.

As the cats stared in frozen horror, Crowpaw willed Starclan to take the apprentice quickly. Blackstar peered over the edge. "There's nothing we can do," she meowed, straightening up. "We have to keep going."

"You're going to leave her?" wailed the king.

"She won't have survived that fall," Blackstar told him. "And we can't reach her body." She touched the king's flank with her muzzle. "I'm sorry, Nightwing. Shadowclan won't forget Smokepaw; I promise."

Hollow-eyed with shock and grief, the cats set off once more, pressing so close to the cliff face that it scraped their fur. But Smokepaw's fall had left a gap in the ledge. Fortunately Longtail was among the cats that had been ahead of the Shadowclan apprentice—Crowpaw gulped at the thought of helping the sightless she-cat across a gap she had no way of measuring—but there were still several cats on the wrong side of the terrifying hole.

Brookleap crouched on the far side, bracing his claws against the rock. "Come on," he called to Weaselpaw, a Windclan apprentice. "It's safe on this side. You can jump it easily."

Weaselpaw stared down at the shadows, her eyes stretched wide.

"The others will freeze waiting for you," Brookleap growled, losing his patience. "Just jump!"

Weaselpaw looked up and blinked. She crouched, keeping her weight well back on her haunches, then leaped across with her front legs outstretched. Brookleap caught her by the scruff as she landed, grunting with the effort. He gave her a nudge up the path and turned to the next cat.

"My kits can't jump that!" Tallpoppy shrank back.

"Can you pass them over?" Brookleap meowed.

Tallpoppy flattened his ears. "It's too far!"

"I'll take them." Leafpaw squeezed carefully past Brookleap and jumped the gap to land in front of Tallpoppy. He stared at him, his eyes filled with fear. "I won't drop them," he promised. He picked up the smallest and padded to the edge of the hole. The kit struggled beneath his chin, its terrified mewls echoing around the chasm. Tallpoppy watched, huge-eyed, as Leafpaw jumped. Pebbles showered from the ledge as he landed beside Brookleap, but he kept

his footing. Crowpaw was amazed by his agility.

"Make sure she stays put," he meowed, placing the kit gently on the ledge. Then he turned and leaped back for the next.

When all three were safely over, Tallpoppy followed, clearing the gap easily with his long legs. "Thank you," he breathed. He pressed his muzzle against each of his kits before nudging them gently onward, up the slope.

"Let's get the others across," Leafpaw mewed to Brookleap. "You stay on this side; I'll go to the other."

When it was Crowpaw's turn, her paws trembled so hard that she was afraid they would shake her right over the edge.

"It's okay," Leafpaw murmured. "It's not as hard as it looks."

Crowpaw felt his warm breath on her fur and tried to concentrate on that instead of the gaping hole before her. She knew that back home, with nothing but the soft forest floor beneath her, she would leap this far without thinking. But here, the gap seemed to drag at her like a black river, pulling her down, down, down...

"Don't think about it!" Brookleap called.

Crowpaw screwed up her eyes, feeling the lip of stone under her paws. *Starclan, help me!* She crouched down and sprang, landing in a skid that made her paws sting.

"Well done!" Brookleap yowled.

Crowpaw shuffled around and saw Brackenfur waiting to jump. She shrank back as Brackenfur hurtled toward her and skittered dangerously near the edge. Crowpaw lunged and grabbed her scruff.

"Thanks," Brackenfur breathed shakily.

"That's okay," Crowpaw muttered through a mouthful of golden-brown tabby fur.

"Hurry and catch up with the others," Brookleap mewed. "We'll make sure the rest get over in one piece."

They padded gingerly up the slope. Tallpoppy had already disappeared through a narrow ravine, and Crowpaw followed him, eager to be away from the ledge. The ravine opened into a sloping valley that fell away toward another ridge. On one side, a great rock cliff soared toward the sky. On the other, a slope swept more gently upward to where heather and grass fought for space among the jutting stones. The other cats hovered like shadows among the rocks. Cinderpelt was already weaving among them, checking that everyone was all right.

Crowpaw's stomach growled. She hoped the hollows and crevices would conceal some small prey. The cats had hardly eaten since they had entered the mountains. The prey-rich fields of Twolegplace seemed a distant memory, and there didn't seem to be enough food here to feed one Clan, let alone four.

"It looks like some of the cats are already hunting," Brackenfur meowed. Rowanclaw was leading a small patrol up one side of the valley. Blackstar was heading for a rocky outcrop a little farther down, flanked by a pair of Shadowclan warriors.

"Crowpaw! Brackenfur!"

Crowpaw heard her father calling and bounded down to him.

"Squirrelflight's organizing hunting patrols," he meowed. "You two can join him."

"Shouldn't I help Cinderpelt?" Crowpaw asked.

Sandstar glanced over to the dark gray medicine cat. "No cat is hurt, though a few are in shock. Cinderpelt told me he could manage."

"Okay," Crowpaw mewed. She hurried to join Squirrelflight, with Brackenfur beside her.

"Is Whitekit okay?" Crowpaw paused as they passed Dustpelt.

"He's fine," Dustpelt assured her. She looked at the clouds. "But once

the snow starts..."

Whitekit narrowed his eyes when he saw Crowpaw. "Why couldn't Cody come with us?" he whined. "Did you tell him to go away?"

Crowpaw shook her head. "He has a home of his own," she told him gently.

"But he was fun!"

"There'll be plenty of time for fun when we get to our new home," Dustpelt promised.

"If we ever get there," Brackenfur muttered as they padded away.

"Of course we'll get there," Crowpaw told her, hoping she sounded as if she believed it.

Bramblepaw looked up as they approached. "Squirrelflight's explaining how the Tribe hunts," she whispered. "We thought it might help."

"Up here, you need to rely on stillness rather than stealth when you're hunting," Squirrelflight was meowing.

"But we're not Tribe cats, we're Clan cats!" argued Rainwhisker. "Why should we be expected to hunt like them?"

"This isn't the forest," Squirrelflight snapped. "Without the cover of undergrowth, prey will spot you in an instant. Here, you have to wait, and keep so still that you blend into the mountain. Then the prey will come to you."

"What prey is going to be that stupid?" snorted Weaselpaw.

"That's what the Tribe taught me!" Squirrelflight's eyes flashed. "If you don't want to starve, you're going to have to learn to hunt like them!" He flicked his tail. "Spiderpaw, come with me. Bramblepaw, you go with Rainwhisker, and you two"—he looked at Crowpaw and Brackenfur—"you two stick together."

"Where shall we hunt?" Crowpaw looked around the valley, at its

perilous ledges and shadowy crevices, and thought with a shudder of the giant cat that had killed Feathertail. "Will we be safe?"

"If you're sensible, yes." Squirrelflight pointed with his tail to a ledge jutting out above them. "Try up there first," he suggested.

Brackenfur nodded and scrambled up the slope, sending a shower of dust and stones down onto the cats below. Crowpaw shook the grit from her fur and followed. Her tired legs ached, but she kept going till she reached the ledge. Brackenfur flicked her tail, signaling to her to be quiet, and Crowpaw smelled at once the familiar scent of mouse. She crouched beside Brackenfur to stare at a patch of coarse grass that sprang from a crack in the ledge. *Stay still.* She recalled Squirrelflight's advice, but it was hard to wait patiently when she was this hungry.

When the grass began to tremble, Brackenfur pulled herself slowly forward. Suddenly the grass shivered and the mouse darted out, heading for a crack in the rock. With a jolt of horror, Crowpaw watched Brackenfur leap after it and tumble straight over the edge.

Crowpaw's mind filled with the memory of Smokepaw vanishing into the gorge, and she had to force herself to look down the side of the valley. To her relief, Brackenfur was very much alive, wailing in terror as she half fell, half skidded down the steep slope. She came to a bone-jarring halt against a stunted hawthorn bush that buckled and quivered under her weight, but stopped her from sliding any farther.

"Brackenfur," she called. "Are you okay?"

The Thunderclan warrior looked up at her, eyes huge with shock. "I'm okay," she mewed. "Just grazed my paws." She began to claw her way back up the slope.

Squirrelflight came dashing across the slope, alarmed by the shower of stones Brackenfur had dislodged. "What happened?"

"I slipped, that's all," Brackenfur told him, though her eyes still glittered with fear.

"You have to be careful!" Squirrelflight hissed. He stopped abruptly and stared past them.

"What is it?" Crowpaw spun around, her heart thudding. With a flood of relief she realized he had just spotted the mouse creeping out of the crack in the rock.

"Stay still," Squirrelflight ordered in a whisper.

"But I could get it in one pounce," Brackenfur breathed back.

"Wait," Squirrelflight growled.

Crowpaw heard the faint beat of wings above her head. Looking up, she saw a huge bracken-colored bird circling overhead. She gulped, wondering exactly what it had spotted as prey—the mouse, or them?

"If we're lucky," Squirrelflight murmured as the eagle folded its wings and swooped down toward them as swift and silent as a Starclan warrior, "it'll go for that mouse and we'll be able to take the Clan something big enough to share."

"And if we're not lucky?" muttered Brackenfur. Squirrelflight didn't answer.

Above them, the eagle's wings seemed to stretch wider than the river that had separated Thunderclan from Riverclan. Crowpaw fought against the urge to turn tail and run. Closer and closer the bird came, until she could see each feather on its massive wings, and its eyes gleaming like tiny black pebbles.

"Wait, wait," Squirrelflight breathed through clenched teeth.

Just when Crowpaw could see the sinews on the bird's yellow talons, it plummeted past them, ignoring the mouse and the three cats on the ledge. It was heading straight for the Clans in the valley below!

Squirrelflight sprang to the edge and peered over. "Look out!" he yowled.

The mass of golden-brown feathers seemed to explode among the cats, who screeched in terror as they raced in all directions. Only the warriors held their ground, leaping up on their hind legs and thrashing the air with unsheathed claws as the eagle climbed up once more, beating its powerful wings. As it began to rise into the sky, Crowpaw saw a small, struggling creature grasped in its long talons, and heard the pitiful mewls of a terrified kit. *No!*

"Marshkit!" Tallpoppy shrieked.

Suddenly Sorreltail sprang into the air as though lifted by the wind. With his outstretched claws he grasped the eagle's talons a heartbeat before they rose out of reach. Yowling with rage, he clung on. The eagle screeched and shook the tortoiseshell and white warrior off. Sorreltail collapsed onto the ground, but his attack had been enough to loosen the eagle's grasp, and the kit plummeted down beside him.

Crowpaw hurled herself off the ledge, landed clumsily, and skidded down the valley. Stones tore at her claws as she slithered down. Squirrelflight and Brackenfur were scrambling behind her, zigzagging across the steep slope to stop themselves from falling headlong. But Crowpaw kept tumbling over and over. A bush broke her fall before she reached the bottom, its thin branches whipping her fur. It was enough to slow her down, and she managed to scrabble to her paws and dash across the valley floor.

"Check that Sorreltail's okay!" Crowpaw ordered Brackenfur. "I'll see to Marshkit."

Tallpoppy was crouching over the scrap of fur that lay on the stony ground. Dustpelt pressed her flank against the Shadowclan king, trying to soothe him but understanding his terror.

Crowpaw leaned over the kit and licked her chest. She could feel her flanks heaving and her tiny heart hammering in her chest. Blood welled on her shoulder, but the cut was not deep.

"She'll be all right," Crowpaw promised. "As long as we keep her warm, she'll survive the shock." She looked up and was relieved to see Cinderpelt limping toward her.

"Lick the wound as clean as you can," Cinderpelt ordered. "We have precious few herbs to cure her if it gets infected."

Crowpaw obeyed immediately, tasting the salty tang of the kit's blood on her tongue.

Tallpoppy pulled his remaining kits close to him, shaking with fear. "Where have you brought us?" he yowled, looking around to find the cats who had led them into the mountain.

"I didn't think an eagle would attack so many!" Bramblepaw gasped as she bounded across the valley floor.

"Did you know this might happen?" Blackstar demanded furiously.

"We knew eagles preyed upon the Tribe, but they always fought them off," Bramblepaw mewed wretchedly.

"We are not the Tribe," Blackstar hissed. "You should have warned us so that we could have found shelter."

"What shelter?" Tallpoppy cried. "There's nowhere to hide. There's nowhere to hunt. *We're* the prey here!"

"It's true," Dawnflower mewed, his voice rising in panic. "We'll be picked off one by one."

"Not if we stick together," Ferncloud argued.

"Yes," Russetfur agreed. "Next time, we'll be more prepared."

"If another bird attacks, we'll drive it off before it gets close to the kits," Hawkfrost promised.

"Ten Clans couldn't drive off a bird like that!" Tallpoppy yowled.

"Maybe not," Leopardstar meowed. "But any cat here would die trying, for the sake of our kits." His gaze flicked around the Clans, and mews of agreement rose from every warrior and apprentice.

Crowpaw blinked. There were no longer four Clans making this perilous journey. There was just one Clan, bound by fear and

helplessness. She left Marshkit with Tallpoppy. Littlecloud was with them now.

"Is Sorreltail okay?" she called, padding to where Brackenfur was sitting beside the tortoiseshell and white warrior.

"I'm fine," Sorreltail meowed, pushing himself to his paws.

"I'll keep an eye on him," Brackenfur promised.

Crowpaw padded over and touched her sister's flank with her nose. "Surely it can't get any worse?" she murmured.

Bramblepaw stared back wordlessly, her eyes clouded with doubt. In desperation Crowpaw turned her gaze toward the sky, praying for the protection of Starclan, wondering if her prayer would reach their ancestors through the snow-laden clouds.

As if in reply, the first freezing flakes began to fall.

Chapter 22

Bramblepaw glimpsed movement on the ledge above. She stopped, her paws sinking into the banked snow, and glanced up. A falcon was feasting on a shrew a few tail-lengths up the rocky outcrop. Bramblepaw knew her dark brown tabby pelt blended into the mountain side, and she stood motionless, hoping that the falcon doesn't notice her.

The snow felt soothing against her raw pads. She wondered if she had the power to leap up the short distance and catch the falcon. Probably not. The past few days had sapped her strength until she almost couldn't be bothered to hunt at all.

The falcon flattened the shrew against the rock and stooped to pull the flesh from it. Bramblepaw felt a wrench of envy as hunger clawed at her belly. Slow as melting ice, she prowled forward, praying the thickly falling snow would camouflage her pelt.

She had to catch some prey. The cold would start killing cats faster than any eagle if the Clans grew any hungrier. Despite their bold promises to Tallpoppy, the shock of losing Smokepaw, and then nearly losing Marshkit had shaken the confidence of even the strongest warriors. Bramblepaw felt a flood of regret so strong it stopped her in her tracks. She had helped to lead the Clans to their death. She was not even sure she would be able to find her way back to them if she caught the falcon. She knew only that they were somewhere near, huddled in the snow, praying to Starclan for deliverance.

If only she could be sure they had reached the place where the Tribe hunted, then at least they might get help from the cats they had met before. Brookleap had taken to ranging out at night, among the snowy crags. He alone seemed comfortable in this barren territory. She knew he was searching for Storm, or any sign of the Tribe, but he had found nothing so far. The Tribe had no need for borders or scent markers. No other cat wanted their unforgiving hunting grounds.

The falcon ruffled its feathers, shaking off some snow, and brought Bramblepaw's wandering thoughts back to the hunt. She tensed her tired muscles and prepared to leap.

Suddenly a flash of fur above her made her draw back. Three lean, mud-streaked cats hurled themselves from the rocks above the falcon. One snared the falcon in its long claws, while the other two bundled Bramblepaw backward, knocking the breath from her. She felt strong paws pinning her under the snow and struggled, but they were too strong for her, and after a few terrified moments she lay still, her breath hoarse and ragged.

"Bramblepaw?"

She heard a familiar voice growl her name and felt paws tug her out of the snow. She blinked cold flakes of ice from her eyes and saw Talon staring at her in undisguised surprise. Two more cave-guards stood behind her, wide-eyed with astonishment.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

As Bramblepaw tried to gather her confused thoughts, she recognized one of the cave-guards. It was Jag, one of the outcasts who had returned to save their Tribemates from Sharptooth. Knowing two of the cats who stood in front of her made her feel a little better. "We've left the forest," she explained. "We're traveling over the mountains."

Talon narrowed her eyes. "Again?"

"We're all going this time."

"All?"

"The four Clans," Bramblepaw mewed. "We couldn't stay in the forest any longer. There was too much destruction. But we never thought the journey would be this hard! Smokepaw fell into a ravine, and then an eagle tried to carry of Marshkit..." She trailed off breathlessly.

"Kits?" Talon demanded. "Out here? Are you mad? You must bring all of these cats to the Cave of Rushing Water and rest. Where did

you leave them?"

"We sheltered under some rocks. There was a tree jutting out above them like a giant claw."

Talon glanced at the cave-guards. "Tree-rock," he meowed. "Go there."

The cave-guards bounded away across the snowdrift, their ears flattened against the falling snow.

"Let's find these Clans of yours before they freeze to death," Talon meowed, picking up the still-warm falcon in her jaws.

Bramblepaw struggled to keep up with the she-cat as she raced after the guards.

"They'll eb safe once we get them to the Cave of Rushing Water," Talon called over her shoulder. Hope gave Bramblepaw new strength, and she scrambled on until she was clear of the drift and pounding after her along a rock ledge that had been shielded from the snow by a sharp overhang. Her paws sent stones showering down the steep slope, but she kept running.

"Eagle!" The cave-guards skidded to a halt where the ledge came to an abrupt end. Looking along the side of the valley, Bramblepaw saw the rocky outcrop where she had left the Clans. Their pelts looked like dark smudges through the driving snow. Above them, Bramblepaw recognized the predatory circling motion of the eagle and felt her belly twist in dread.

The cave-guards sank back onto their haunches, then sprang over the deep cleft that lay between them and the Clan cats. Talon followed, leaping easily over the gap even though she was carrying the dead falcon.

Bramblepaw looked across the divide, then down at the long drop beneath her. Rocks sharp as teeth pierced the snow that pooled in the chasm beneath. Summoning up every last bit of her strength, she leaped toward the rocky ledge where Talon waited. Reaching out desperately with her forepaws, she grasped the ledge, her hind

legs churning empty air. Talon lunged forward, and she felt her teeth sink into her scruff as she pulled her up to safety.

The moment she felt solid ground beneath her paws, Bramblepaw raced after the Tribe cats. Above them, the eagle folded its wings and started to drop toward the ground.

"Whitekit!" Dustpelt's shriek tore through the air. Russetfur leaped forward to scoop up the kit and thrust him and his mother into the shadows of the rock. Squirrelflight herded Dawnflower and his kits after them. Hawkfrost leaped to Smokefur's side, and together they shielded Tallstar from the attack.

As the eagle swooped down, its talons raking the air, the cave-guards plunged among the Clans. Jag swiped at the bird's wing, and another cave-guard lunged at it, clawing a feather from its tail. The air thrummed with the beating of the great bird's wings as it swooped upward, screeching, into the blizzard.

The Clan cats crept out from the shelter of the rock and stared in amazement at their rescuers. They looked scrawny and miserable and bedraggled, and Bramblepaw was suddenly afraid that the Tribe cats would tell them to give up trying to cross the mountains and go back to wait for warmer weather before restarting their journey.

Squirrelflight bounded over, flicking lumps of snow up from his paws. "Talon! Jag!" He touched noses happily with each cave-guard.

Leafpaw padded up and flicked his tail against Talon's flank. "Great timing," he mewed.

"This is Talon," Bramblepaw announced to the Clans. "And Jag and..."

"I'm Sheer Path Beside Waterfall," the third cave-guard meowed. Her voice carried the strange accent Bramblepaw had forgotten; it was good to hear it again.

Talon looked around. "Where is Brookleap?"

"He went hunting," Rowanclaw explained.

Sandstar shouldered his way to the front. "Are you able to help us? The kits are freezing," he meowed. "One is close to death."

"Let me see," ordered Talon.

"Here!" Crowpaw called from beneath the overhang where Tallpoppy was licking his limp kit. Instantly Sheer picks the kit up in her jaws and placed it on Tallpoppy's flank.

"Keep it off the ground," the Tribe she-cat growled. "The rock will suck the warmth from her. And don't lick. The wet will make her colder." She began to rub the kit roughly with her forepaws, ruffling its damp fur until the kit began to stir. "Keep rubbing," she told Crowpaw. "Remember, don't lick."

The Shadowclan king stared at Sheer with eyes brimming with emotion, but the Tribe cat only nodded curtly and directed a question at Sandstar.

"How long have you been here?" she asked.

"Too long," Bramblepaw murmured. She felt the weakness of hunger returning now the danger had passed. The cold was making her sleepy.

"We'll take you all back to the cave," Talon offered. "You can get warm and eat there."

"We have to keep going." Blackstar's eyes glittered. "We should leave the mountains before the snow gets any worse."

"You will die if you do not come with us," Talon meowed.

Blackstar flattened her ears.

Sandstar turned his gaze on the Shadowclan leader. "The kits and elders will never make it," he mewed quietly.

"And Tallstar needs to rest," Smokefur called out. The Windclan leader looked as tired and worn as any of the elders.

"We *all* need to rest," Leopardstar put in.

"But Leafpaw has told us there's moorland just beyond the mountains," Mudclaw argued. "We should head for that."

Blackstar turned to Littlecloud. "What do you think?"

"The elders don't have the strength to go on," the medicine cat mewed. "And the kits will freeze without food."

"This one will be dead by sundown if she doesn't get some shelter," Crowpaw called. She was rubbing Marshkit, watched closely by her father, Tallpoppy.

"Very well." Blackstar stared at Talon. "We'll come with you."

Talon glanced at Mudclaw. Bramblepaw wondered if she thought Mudclaw was one of the Clan leaders, since Tallstar was too frail to speak on behalf of the Windclan cats.

"We'll come too," Mudclaw muttered.

Talon dipped her head respectfully. "Good."

Tallpoppy picked up his kit by the scruff of her neck. Marshkit squirmed and gave a squeak of protest. "It's all right, little one," her father murmured. "You'll be safe soon."

The others began to stir, hauling themselves to their paws as they prepared to follow the Tribe cats to the cave.

Suddenly a dark shape raced from a shadowy gully near the overhang.

"Squirrelflight! I've scented the Tribe!" It was Brookleap. He paused, staring around the surprised faces. Then he recognized Talon. "You're here!"

"We found Bramblepaw," Talon explained.

Brookleap padded forward and touched the cave-guard's flank with her nose. "How's Storm?" he asked.

"She's fine," Talon replied. "We'd better get on." He glanced at Jag

and Sheer. "I'll lead the way; you two bring up the rear."

Bramblepaw felt exhaustion dragging at her paws as she helped to guide the Clans along the unseen paths that led toward the waterfall. She paused only when they reached the cleft in the mountain where the water thundered over the rocks and pounded, frothing, into the deep pool below. Squirrelflight, Leafpaw, Brookleap, and Rowanclaw stopped beside her.

"We're back," Bramblepaw breathed.

Brookleap glanced at the mound of earth that marked his brother's resting place. "I wasn't sure we'd ever see this place again," he murmured.

The Clans padded past them, following Talon onto the narrow ledge that led behind the wall of water.

"Come on," Brookleap mewed. "The Clan will need us. They've never met the Tribe before." He hurried forward, Squirrelflight, Bramblepaw, and Rowanclaw following. Leafpaw stayed behind, staring at Feathertail's grave.

The cats filed slowly behind the waterfall, their fur darkening as the spray soaked their pelts. Brookleap, Squirrelflight, and Rowanclaw wove among them. Bramblepaw saw Ashfur stop at the edge of the thundering sheer of water. "We have to go behind *there?*"

Behind the waterfall, the light wavered on the rock, which glittered and dripped with moisture. "Go on," Bramblepaw urged Ashfur. "It's warm inside; I promise."

The Thunderclan warrior stepped inside, and Bramblepaw followed her. Half-forgotten scents washed over her, and, as her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she saw the Tribe staring at the visitors in astonishment.

One young she-cat, her dark gray fur just visible beneath the streaks of mud that all Tribe cats wore, was looking around with something close to excitement, and even joy. It was Storm That Covers the Sky, the prey-hunter who had befriended the Clan cats on their last visit

to the cave. Bramblepaw saw her desperately searching the sea of faces, and knew she was looking for only one cat.

Bramblepaw felt fur brush against hers as Brookleap bounded past. He headed straight for Storm, and the two cats touched noses with such tenderness that Bramblepaw felt a rush of pity. It was all too clear that Brookleap had more heartbreak ahead of him, when the time came to leave the Tribe she-cat for a second time.

Chapter 23

Crowpaw padded into the cave, blinking at the gloom. The roar of the waterfall made the air tremble, and the light filtering through the sheet of tumbling water quivered on the rocky walls. A stream sparkled like frost as it trickled down the mossy rocks and ran into a pool in the cave floor. Two tunnels led away into darkness, one at each end of the back wall, and narrow claws of stone hung down from the shadowy roof far above.

Crowpaw felt the Tribe cats staring at her, their eyes gleaming in the darkness. She padded over to Bramblepaw. "They don't seem frightened of us."

Bramblepaw blinked. "Why should they be? We hardly look threatening, as thin as we are. And besides, there are no other cats around here. Now that Sharptooth is dead, the only enemies the Tribe knows are eagles."

"I'd forgotten about Sharptooth," Crowpaw mewed. "All this would have been so much worse if she were still prowling the mountains."

"Yes," Bramblepaw agreed, her gaze softening. "When Feathertail died, he did more than save the Tribe. He helped to protect us, too."

As her eyes adjusted, Crowpaw began to pick out individual shapes, some lithe and sleek, others well muscled and broad shouldered. Yet they were all smaller than the Clan cats—even Windclan—leaner, with broad heads and slender necks.

The kits playing outside the entrance to one of the tunnels stopped and gazed at the Clan cats as they filed into the cave, their eyes wide and curious. A gray and white king padded over to Crowpaw and sniffed her pelt.

"This is Wing," Bramblepaw explained. "She looked after Rowanclaw last time we were here, when she was sick from a rat bite."

The Tribe king dipped his head. "Stoneteller said you were coming," he meowed. "The Tribe of Endless Hunting told her that old friends would return and bring new friends with them."

Despite her tiredness and hunger, Crowpaw's fur prickled with curiosity. "How did she know?" she whispered to Bramblepaw.

"Stoneteller shares with the Tribe's ancestors like you do with Starclan," Bramblepaw replied quietly.

Talon padded over. "There's caught prey here," she offered, flicking her tail toward a pile of fresh-kill.

Crowpaw blinked. "Surely there can't be enough to share with us all?"

"Eat." Talon flicked her tail once more to the pile of fresh-kill. "Crag is organizing a hunt. There will soon be enough."

The smell of rabbit rising from the fresh-kill pile made Crowpaw's stomach growl, but she couldn't eat until she knew the rest of the Clan was all right. Dipping her head respectfully, she left Bramblepaw with her mountain friends and found Cinderpelt among the other medicine cats gathered near the entrance.

"A cat called Crag said we can use the nests over there." Cinderpelt gestured to a cluster of shallow scoops in the earth floor, lined with moss and feathers.

"Will there be enough room?" Littlecloud wondered.

"The coldest and weakest can use the nests," Barkface suggested. "The rest must sleep where they can find space. At least we're safe from the snow and wind in here."

"And there's food." Crowpaw nodded toward the pile of fresh-kill. Some of the Tribe cats were already taking pieces of prey and bringing them over to the Clans. Talon dropped a rabbit at Mudclaw's paws. The Windclan deputy looked at it with hungry

eyes and nodded a curt thanks to the cave-guard before taking the rabbit to her queens, kings, and apprentices.

"We should get the kits into nests to warm up," Mothwing mewed.

Crowpaw joined the other medicine cats as the began to usher the younger cats and their mothers and fathers toward the soft hollows in the cave floor. As she helped to settle Tallpoppy and his kits into a nest, a long-bodied Tribe she-cat padded toward her. Her fur was so streaked with mud she could not make out the color of her pelt. Only the white whiskers around her muzzle betrayed her age.

"Who among you is healer?" she asked.

Startled, Crowpaw looked back at her. Bramblepaw had told her that the same cat was both healer and leader around the Tribe. Which did she wish to meet? She glanced toward Cinderpelt, but he was busy examining Dawnflower's kits.

"I'll take you to meet Sandstar," she decided. She led her to where her father stood in quiet discussion with the other Clan leaders.

"We must not stay long," Blackstar was muttering. "The snow will only get worse." She looked around as Crowpaw approached.

"This is Stoneteller." Crowpaw dipped her head and back away.

"You are healer?" Stoneteller asked Sandstar.

"I'm leader of Thunderclan," he replied. "Cinderpelt is our Clan healer." He flicked his tail toward Cinderpelt, who was watching them with interest from the other side of the cave. "This is Blackstar, Leopardstar, and Tallstar." Sandstar nodded to the three leaders in turn.

"You are all leaders?"

"Yes, we are," Leopardstar meowed.

Stoneteller's gaze rested on Tallstar, whose eyes were half-closed with exhaustion. "You are not well," she meowed. "We give you herbs." She glanced over her shoulder, catching the eye of a gray-

brown tabby tom. "Bird, bring strengthening herbs."

The tabby slipped away down one of the tunnels.

"The Tribe is grateful to your friends for killing Sharptooth. To Feathertail most of all. His spirit will always be remembered by us."

"He had his father's courage," Sandstar agreed, and Crowpaw winced to hear the grief still raw in his voice when he thought of Silverstream.

"You must eat and rest," Stoneteller went on.

"But after that we must continue our journey," Blackstar meowed.

Stoneteller dipped her head. "We would not delay you."

Bird returned with a mouthful of herbs and laid them in front of Tallstar.

Crowpaw felt her whiskers twitch with curiosity. "What herbs are those?"

Stoneteller's amber eyes gleamed in the half-light.

"I am learning to be a healer," Crowpaw explained quickly. "I know the herbs of the forest, but in the mountains..." She paused. "Everything is so different here."

"I hope she isn't bothering you," Cinderpelt's soft mew sounded beside them. "She's very inquisitive."

"Inquisitive is good in a healer," Stoneteller rasped. "She will learn much." She blinked kindly at Crowpaw. "The herbs are ragwort and lamb's ear. Good for strength."

"May I see some later, so I can recognize them if I find them again?"

"Of course." Crowpaw felt warmth in this wise old cat's voice, and she longed to learn from her, to understand the differences between Tribe and Clan. "Wing said you knew we were coming," she meowed. "Is that true?"

Stoneteller nodded. "The Tribe of Endless Hunting showed me."

"Do you share dreams with your ancestors?" Cinderpelt asked.

"Share dreams?" she echoed. "No, I interpret the signs of rock and leaf and water, and know that this is the voice of the Tribe of Endless Hunting."

"Cinderpelt interprets signs for our Clan," Crowpaw mewed eagerly. "Signs sent by Starclan. He's teaching me how to read them too."

"She has a natural talent for it," Cinderpelt added.

"Then perhaps she would like to see the Cave of Pointed Stones," Stoneteller suggested.

"Cave of Pointed Stones?" Crowpaw echoed. "Is that like our Moonstone?"

"I do not know your Moonstone," murmured Stoneteller as she turned toward one of the dark tunnels that led from the cave. "If it is the place where the voices of your ancestors speak loudest, then yes, it is like your Moonstone."

Her tail twitching with excitement, Crowpaw padded after Cinderpelt and Stoneteller down the narrow passage. She wondered if they would have to travel as far down into the darkness of the earth as they did not reach the Moonstone; but within a few tail-lengths the passage opened out into another cave, sealed by walls of slippery rock.

Blinking as her eyes adjusted to the gloom, Crowpaw peered around. It was much smaller than the main cave, but many more stone claws reached down from the roof, and some stretched up from the ground. A few had joined together, like paws meeting, and in the pale light that seeped from a gap in the roof. Crowpaw saw that they glistened with water, which trickled down into pools on the hard stone floor.

Stoneteller touched one of the pools with her paw and sent ripples flashing across it. "The snow will melt, and these pools will grow, and when starlight shines I will see in them what the Tribe of

Endless Hunting wishes me to know."

"How often do you share with the Tribe of Endless Hunting?" Cinderpelt asked.

"When the pools form," Stoneteller replied.

"We meet at half-moon to share with Starclan..."

Crowpaw found her gaze drifting around the cave. She padded away from where Cinderpelt and Stoneteller were exchanging experiences and wove among the stone claws until they were hidden from sight. Her paws felt heavy, and tiredness weighed on her pelt like water. She lay down on the damp stone floor and rested her nose upon her paws, mesmerized by the glitter of water dripping from stone. She closed her eyes. *Starclan? Are you here?*

Her mind swirled with the sound of rushing water. At the very edge of her thoughts, she heard the roaring of a lion and saw the rippling of shadowy pelts—pelts she did not recognize. *Who are you?* she asked desperately. Voices breathed back to her, speaking words she did not understand. Panic flooded Crowpaw, and she blinked open her eyes.

Starclan was not here. She could hear only the voices of the Tribe's ancestors. Crowpaw had never felt so alone in her life.

Though Crowpaw begged her father to let another cat take her place. Sandstar insisted she sleep beside Cinderpelt in one of the feather-lined nests on the cave floor.

"The Clan needs its medicine cats now more than ever," he told her. "You must rest well."

How could she rest? It was all she could do to lick her ruffled, dirty fur. She just hoped Cinderpelt had not noticed the alarm in her eyes after visiting the Pointed Stones. *What will we do without Starclan?* The thought raced around her mind like a mouse trapped in its hole.

Bramblepaw and Squirrelflight were already asleep, curled up together near the back of the cave. As Crowpaw kneaded the soft

feathers beside Cinderpelt, she saw Storm slip out of the cave, followed by Leafpaw and Brookleap. "Where are they going?" she whispered to Cinderpelt.

"They're going to sit vigil for Feathertail," Cinderpelt murmured, closing his eyes.

Crowpaw settled down beside her mentor and tucked her tail over her nose. She wondered which ancestors Feathertail hunted with now. She pressed close to Cinderpelt, seeking comfort from his warm dark gray fur. How could she sleep knowing that Starclan had not come with them on this journey? But she was exhausted, and as soon as she closed her eyes, she felt sleep draw her in.

A shining expanse of water spread before her, its indigo surface glittering with stars. Nothing stirred. Even the wind was still. Crowpaw watched the water, too scared to look up in case the stars she saw reflected on the water were just an illusion. What if the sky was empty? It would be yet another sign that Starclan wasn't here.

Suddenly a breath of wind ruffled her fur. Crowpaw stared into the darkness, her fur quivering. A cat was speaking to her, so softly she could barely hear. She lifted her nose. The wind carried a familiar scent, too faint for her to be sure which cat it belonged to.

"Who's there?" she cried.

The wind blew harder, swelling the sound of the whispering voice until Crowpaw could just make out what it was saying. "Wherever you go, we will search for you."

Crowpaw turned to see the gentle face of Spottedleaf beside her. The tortoiseshell medicine cat's eyes glimmered, reflecting the starry waters, but his body shivered like a heat haze, no more solid than the stars in the water.

"You haven't left us!" Crowpaw breathed.

But Spottedleaf did not answer. The wind dropped and he faded into shadow.

"You're cheerful today," Cinderpelt mewed. He looked up at

Crowpaw, who was sitting beside him, washing in the early morning light that shone through the waterfall.

Crowpaw stopped washing. "I had a dream," she confessed.

Cinderpelt sat up. "Did Starclan speak to you?"

Crowpaw blinked. Would Cinderpelt be offended that Starclan had chosen an apprentice for their message, and not Thunderclan's medicine cat? "I'm sorry," she began. "Perhaps they came when I was sleeping and you were awake, and that's why they chose me—"

Cinderpelt cut her off with the gentlest touch of his tail on Crowpaw's shoulder. "It's okay, Crowpaw," he mewed. "I've always known that you have a bond with Starclan that is stronger than anything I've seen before. It's a great responsibility, and I'm very proud of how you cope with it."

Crowpaw gazed at him, searching for words to express her relief and gratitude.

"What was the dream?" Cinderpelt prompted.

"It was very faint," Crowpaw warned him. "But I know for certain that Starclan is still watching us, and I believe they will be with us wherever we are going."

Sandstar padded over, his pale ginger coat glowing almost white in the watery light.

"Are we leaving?" Cinderpelt asked.

Sandstar shook his head. "It snowed all night, and Stoneteller says there's more on the way. The Tribe is organizing a hunt so we'll have enough fresh-kill to last out the bad weather."

"Does that mean we're stuck here?" Crowpaw mewed in alarm.

"For now." Sandstar watched Blackstar pacing back and forth in front of the cave entrance. "We'll leave as soon as we can."

"Crowpaw!" Brackenfur bounded over. "Do you want to come

hunting with some of the Tribe?" She glanced at Sandstar. "If that's okay?"

Sandstar turned to Cinderpelt. "Can you spare her?"

"Yes, of course," Cinderpelt answered.

"Thanks." Crowpaw mewed. After living in the forest it felt strange to be cooped up in the gloomy cave, and despite the cold she welcomed the feeling of fresh air in her fur.

She followed Brackenfur over to Talon and Crag. Storm was with them, with Brookleap at her side. Crowpaw was startled to see how different Brookleap looked. His fur was streaked with mud, just like the Tribe cats', and there was a toughness in his muscles that made him look more like a member of the Tribe than the skinny Clan cats.

"I hope they're not going to slow us down," Crag muttered to Storm and Talon. "We've got too many mouths to feed."

"Of course they won't slow us down," Storm mewed. "Brookleap was becoming a good prey-hunter by the time he left."

"I suppose he wasn't bad," Crag conceded. She glanced at Crowpaw. "You're an apprentice, right? What are you hoping to be? A prey-hunter or a cave-guard?"

Crowpaw stared at her, not understanding.

"The Tribe divides its duties," Brookleap explained. "The cave-guards protect the Tribe, the prey-hunters feed them. Storm is a prey-hunter and Crag is a cave-guard."

"Then why are you coming hunting?" Crowpaw asked Crag hesitantly.

Crag let out an unexpected purr of amusement. "Who's going to watch the skies while you've got your eye on the prey?" she asked, and Crowpaw remembered with a shudder the eagle that had attacked the Clan. She felt a prickle of resentment at Crag's superior attitude, but resisted the urge to tell her she was an apprentice

medicine cat, to a Tribe cat, that might sound as if she were claiming to be a leader.

"In the forest we could scent for danger and hunt at the same time," Brackenfur mewed.

"Really? Well, how do you scent an eagle fling a mountain's height above your head?" Crag retorted.

"Come on," Storm meowed impatiently. "We're wasting time."

She led the way out from behind the waterfall and along a ledge that led them up among the peaks. The blizzard had died away, but the thick snow soon froze Crowpaw's feet. The air was so cold, it almost hurt to breathe, and her eyes started to stream as soon as they left the warmth of the cave. But there was no way she was going to complain; she wanted to prove to Crag that forest cats could handle anything the mountain cats could. She stifled a shiver and glanced up. Heavy yellow clouds nested on the mountaintops, promising more snow.

As they neared a stunted thornbush, its branches weighed down with fresh snow, Storm stopped and crouched low. Crag and Brookleap flanked her, ducking down as well. Crowpaw copied them, pressing her belly flat against the snow beside Brackenfur. Storm stared at the bush, her nose twitching as though she scented prey.

Crowpaw sniffed. The smell of rabbit wafted past her on the breeze. Instinctively she started to creep forward.

"Stop!" Brookleap warned her with a hiss. "Wait and watch how Storm does it."

Storm was as still as ice, only the faintest lift of her mud-streaked flank showing that she wasn't a rock embedded in the snow. Just when Crowpaw began to think she would turn into an icicle if she stayed still any longer, a young rabbit hopped from under the bush, testing the air with its quivering nose.

It hopped closer, not seeing the cats flat against the snow. Crowpaw

opened her mouth. The prey-scent was still strong near the bush, which was odd if the rabbit had come out into the open. Perhaps the rabbit had been sheltering there for a long time. Suddenly Storm shot forward and lunged at the rabbit. She caught it in her jaws and killed it with merciful speed.

Out of the corner of her eye, Crowpaw noticed the dush tremble. She darted forward just as a second rabbit fled across the snow. It raced toward a rocky outcrop, but Crowpaw was fast—and hungry—and caught it before it could escape.

"Well spotted!" Storm congratulated her with a warm purr.

"I could smell two scents," Crowpaw panted.

Crag stared at her in surprise. "You smelled both rabbits at the same time?"

"We're used to the forest with all its plants and prey," she mewed, trying to explain. "The air up here is clearer; the scents are not so cluttered. It's easy to spot different smells."

Brackenfur blinked proudly at her, and Brookleap gave a small nod. Crag dipped her head in respect and, picking up one of the rabbits, led the way back to the waterfall.

Crowpaw sat near the entrance of the cave, warmed by the soft breathing of the cats around her. Ferncloud lay beside Smokefur and Tallstar. Spiderpaw stretched out beside Leafpaw. Tallpoppy and Dustpelt shared tongues while their kits played together. Even Hawkfrost looked relaxed as she watched Mothwing grooming Cloudrunner's pelt for fleas. In spite of the peaceful scene, Crowpaw felt a tremor of concern. She had never seen the Clans so comfortable around each other before, not even at Gatherings. Starclan may be waiting for them, but would there still be four Clans by the time they reached their new home?

She stared through the sheet of thundering water and saw the full moon trembling above the peaks. None of the Clan cats had mentioned that it was a full moon, and time for a Gathering. There was no need. Suddenly she heard rasping breath by her ear, and she

turned to see Stoneteller looking down at her.

"You are watching the moon for signs?" she meowed.

"I was thinking of the Gatherings," Crowpaw mewed.

"Gatherings?" Stoneteller looked puzzled.

"In the time before we left, the four Clans would meet in peace only at full moon."

"Clans did not live in harmony?"

"Not always," Crowpaw admitted. "Unlike you, we had clear boundaries between our hunting territories."

Stoneteller glanced around. "Trouble has brought you together," she observed.

"But there will always be boundaries between us," Crowpaw insisted.

"Why? Together you find food easier."

"There have always been four Clans. Loyalty to our own Clan makes us strong."

"But you all share a belief in your Starclan?"

"We will all become warriors in Starclan eventually," Crowpaw murmured. She gazed at the moon, a blurred white disk behind the falling water.

Stoneteller's eyes glowed. "You are still a to-be, yet you are wise."

Feeling her ears grow hot with embarrassment, Crowpaw looked away.

"We will have a gathering of our own tonight," Stoneteller went on. She raised her voice. "Cats of the Clans and of the Tribe, we have not celebrated our deliverance from Sharptooth," she meowed. "Instead we grieved for Feathertail, who died saving us. But tonight

we shall honor the cats who came from far away and killed the terrible creature."

Mews of agreement rose among the Tribe cats. The kits mewed with excitement, and the boldest of them padded over to where Tallpoppy's kits played with Whitekit.

"Come and share with us," the Tribe kit offered.

Whitekit glanced at his mother, who nodded, her eyes shining with warmth. Tallpoppy and Dawnflower quickly gave their approval, and the Clan kits wasted no time in following the Tribe kit across the cave.

One by one, the Tribe cats got to their paws and took a piece of fresh-kill from the pile. They placed each piece solemnly at the paws of a Clan cat until every cat had been served. The Clan cats watched and waited, unsure what to do.

Crowpaw's eyes widened in surprise as Crag dropped a rabbit at her paws.

"May I share with you?" she asked.

She nodded shyly.

Stoneteller padded to the center of the cave. "We feast in honor of Feathertail," she declared. "His spirit will live forever in the Tribe of Endless Hunting. We honor too the cats who refused to desert us and returned to fulfill the prophecy of our ancestors." She dipped her head in turn to Squirrelflight, Bramblepaw, Rowanclaw, Leafpaw, and Brookleap, who each straightened proudly.

"Now let us eat!" Stoneteller called, her mew echoing around the cave.

Crag took a bite from the rabbit she had laid on the ground and then pushed it over to Crowpaw. Guessing this was a custom of the Tribe, she took a bite and passed it back to her. Back in the forest, the cats had shared food too, but there was usually enough fresh-kill for each cat to have a whole piece each. She wondered if the Tribe's formal sharing ritual arose from the scarcity of prey in the

mountains.

After the meal, the cats lay, full-bellied, and quietly shared tongues. Tallstar limped to the center of the cave and gazed around at the cats until they fell silent. Smokefur crept to her side, supporting the Windclan leader's frail body with his own.

"Who's that skinny old raven?" mewed a Tribe kit.

"Hush!" Her father cuffed her sharply. "That's a very noble Clan leader!"

But though she had to lean on the young warrior, Tallstar's eyes shone with as much strength and determination as a leader on her first life, rather than her last. "Leafpaw?"

The Windclan apprentice looked up, bewildered.

"Leafpaw has served his Clan with bravery and loyalty." Tallstar's voice cracked as she stifled a cough. "He should have received his warrior name long ago," she rasped. "But the tragedies of the past moons have prevented this. Tonight, if Stoneteller will do me the kindness of letting a Clan ceremony into her Tribe's home, I wish to honor Leafpaw's great skill and courage by giving him his warrior name."

Murmurs of agreement rose from the Windclan cats, but they turned to mews of surprise as Leafpaw stepped forward. This wasn't part of the warrior naming ceremony.

"May I ask something, Tallstar?" he mewed.

Tallstar narrowed her eyes and nodded for him to go on.

"I would like to choose my own warrior name. If it is all right, I wish to be known as Leaffeather." Leafpaw spoke so quietly, his voice was almost lost in the pounding water. "I wish to keep alive the memory of... of the cat who did not return from the first journey."

Brookleap's ears flicked, and her stared down at his paws.

There was a long pause; then Tallstar announced, "A noble request. Very well. I name you Leaffeather. May Starclan protect you and accept you as a Windclan warrior in life as well as after."

The Windclan cats jumped up and went over to congratulate their Clanmate.

"That was a brilliant idea!" Bramblepaw bounded over to Leaffeather's side. Squirrelflight, Rowanclaw, and Brookleap joined her.

"It's a great name," Rowanclaw agreed as Squirrelflight wound his lean body around Leaffeather, purring. Brookleap touched his muzzle to Leaffeather's flank as if he were too moved to speak.

"Thank you," Leaffeather murmured. He gazed past them at the waterfall, turned silver by the light of the moon. "I will sit my vigil tonight beside Feathertail's grave."

Crowpaw watched as he slipped away from his friends and Clanmates and padded out of the cave.

"So he's a warrior now, yes?" Crag asked her, her eyes shining with curiosity.

"Yes." Crowpaw got to her paws. "Thank you for sharing with me," she murmured. The lonely moon called her from the crowded den, and she longed to search the clear sky for Silverpelt.

Padding out from behind the waterfall, she scrambled up the rocks and sat high above the pool where the tumbling water foamed and surged. The stars glittered overhead as Crowpaw gazed down to where Leaffeather sat vigil. He was sitting with his head bowed beside the low mound of rocks that marked Feathertail's grave. Was she really with the Tribe of Endless Hunting rather than Starclan? *Make him welcome, whoever you are,* Crowpaw begged silently.

She watched Leaffeather for a moment, her heart aching for his loss. Then she lifted her head and stared around the peaks, wondering if Starclan watched him too. There was a tranquility in this high place she had not felt since she lay beneath the trees in the forest. In the

bright moonlight, something caught her eye on a small ledge opposite the cave entrance, and Crowpaw thought she saw two cats glowing beneath the stars. She was almost certain that two cats stood there, looking down at Leaffeather; one was slightly taller than the other, but they both had similar frames, as though they were kin.

Feathertail and Graystripe?

Crowpaw blinked, and when she opened her eyes, the cats had vanished.

Chapter 24

Bramblepaw hurried after Brookleap along a rocky trail that only days ago had been buried beneath a tail-length of snow. He seemed determined to cross most of the mountains in search of prey. The rocks echoed with the drip, drip, drip of melting ice. Even the deepest snowdrifts were thawing. Dark gray rainclouds rolled toward the mountains, carried on a milder wind that was releasing the peaks from the grip of the snow and ice.

Not for the first time, Bramblepaw wondered why the Riverclan warrior had asked her to go hunting when back in the cave the Clans were getting ready to leave. They wouldn't be able to carry any fresh-kill with them; perhaps Brookleap wanted to catch some prey to say thank you to the Tribe for their hospitality.

"Why isn't Storm coming hunting with us?" she panted. The prey-hunter had seemed like Brookleap's shadow in the past few days.

Brookleap concentrated on jumping onto a boulder, and didn't reply.

"Have you had an argument with her?" The Riverclan warrior was clearly troubled by something. His shoulders were hunched, and he had hardly spoken since they left the cave. She scrabbled awkwardly onto the boulder next to him, her mind racing. Had Brookleap asked Storm to join the Clans, and travel with them to their new home? The thought made Bramblepaw's tail quiver. It wouldn't be the first time an outsider had joined the Clans. Her own father had been raised as a kittypet. But at least Sandstar had been born near the forest. Storm was a mountain cat, and Bramblepaw knew that wherever the Clans settled, it would be nothing like this barren place.

She spotted a mouse on the ridge ahead, tiptoeing out from a crevice to find food. She hissed a warning to Brookleap, who stopped and crouched down, waiting until the mouse had wandered farther onto the trail. Though she longed to make the catch,

Bramblepaw knew Brookleap's coat would be more easily camouflage here, and she pressed his dark brown tabby belly as close to the ground as she could, hoping that stillness would keep her hidden.

Brookleap held still for another moment, then pounced. He snapped the mouse's spine and turned back to face Bramblepaw, the fresh-kill hanging in his jaws.

"Is that a parting gift for Storm?" Bramblepaw prompted gently.

Brookleap blinked.

"Look, what's wrong?" Bramblepaw asked, unable to bear seeing her friend so troubled.

Brookleap dropped the mouse, suddenly looking exhausted. When he lifted his head, his eyes were shadowed with uncertainty. "I've decided to stay with the Tribe."

"*What?*"

"I've lost Feathertail and Silverstream, and I never knew Graystripe. I have no kin left in the Clans. Even my mentor, Stonefur, is dead. Apart from Feathertail, she was the closest thing to kin that I had in Riverclan. I don't even have a home anymore. It feels as though everything has been stolen from me, one thing after another."

"But what about your Clan?" Bramblepaw protested. "Riverclan needs you."

"Riverclan has good, strong warriors." He looked into Bramblepaw's eyes and must have seen the wary look there. "Even Hawkfrost," he meowed as if he could read her mind. "Riverclan will be safe without me."

"But this is such a different place," Bramblepaw argued. "Once we've found our new home, you can start again..."

"Oh, Bramblepaw, can't you understand? I love Storm, and I want to stay with her."

"I thought you might ask her to join the Clans!" Bramblepaw blurted out.

Brookleap shook his head. "She would be lost without the mountains. But I know that I can live here. There's water here—noisier than the river—but it's still water. There's plenty of fresh-kill, now that I know how to hunt like the Tribe. And my brother's spirit is here..." He let out a long sigh. "All the Clans have lost their homes, but I feel like I have lost more than any cat. This is the first time in many moons that I feel as if I have actually found something."

"There's no need to say any more," Bramblepaw whispered sadly. "I understand."

As they walked back to the cave, her mind whirled. Once again, everything had changed, just when she thought there was nothing left to lose. They slipped behind the waterfall, and Brookleap carried the mouse to the fresh-kill pile, while Bramblepaw stood at the cave entrance feeling dazed.

"Bramblepaw!" Crowpaw rushed up to her. "Stoneteller has given us strengthening herbs to share with the Clans."

Bramblepaw stared at her. "Th-that's great," she mewed.

"Are you okay?"

"Crowpaw!" Cinderpelt was calling to her across the cave.

"I have to go," Crowpaw breathed, turning away. "Windclan is waiting for the herbs."

Bramblepaw watched her go, her eyes slowly adjusting to the gloom. Another shape loomed toward her from the shadows, and her heart sank as she recognized the massive shoulders. What did Hawkfrost want with her?

"Bramblepaw?"

She blinked. It was Squirrelflight. He was looking at her quizzically. "Are you coming in?" he meowed. "We have to make sure everyone's

eaten."

Bramblepaw felt dizzy.

"Is something wrong?" Squirrelflight stared at her.

Bramblepaw shook her head helplessly. Across the cave, she could see Brookleap murmuring something to Storm.

Squirrelflight followed her gaze. "Brookleap's staying, isn't he?"

"He wants to stay with Storm," Bramblepaw whispered.

There was a long pause. "You'll miss him, won't you?"

"Of course I will!" Bramblepaw replied, surprised. She turned to look up at Squirrelflight and saw a flicker of something in his green eyes. Was he feeling *jealous*? "Oh, Squirrelflight," she breathed. "My heart is with Thunderclan; don't you know that?" She lightly brushed her tail along his flank. "My heart is with *you*."

His eyes closed, and Bramblepaw suddenly hoped she hadn't said the wrong thing. Then he blinked them open again and looked at her so gently that she felt as if she could have stood there forever.

"We must all follow our hearts," he murmured. Bramblepaw's fears about what lay ahead seemed to dissolve in an instant, like mist in greenleaf. She would lose a friend when Brookleap stayed behind, but she would never be alone.

A movement caught her eye. Stoneteller was padding to the center of the cave.

"The Clans are leaving," she announced to her Tribe. "I want some of you to go with them to show them the path out of the mountains. They head for hillplace, not sunset, so take them along the path that leads toward the Great Star."

Bramblepaw felt a rush of excitement. Were the Tribe cats going to take them straight to where the dying warrior had disappeared behind the mountain range?

Stoneteller dipped her head to each of the Clan leaders in turn. "I wish the cats of Starclan good hunting."

"Thank you, Stoneteller." Sandstar dipped his head. "Your Tribe has shown us more kindness than we could have dreamed of, and we are sad to leave. But we are expected at another place promised to us by our warrior ancestors." He turned to the other Clan leaders. "Tallstar, is Windclan ready?"

The Windclan leader stared at him, her eyes clouded with confusion, then glanced at Smokefur, who was standing next to her. Smokefur nodded back at her encouragingly, but before Tallstar could say anything, Mudclaw raised her head. "We're ready," she meowed.

"Shadowclan is ready too," Blackstar called.

Leopardstar raised his tail. "All my cats are ready."

"Not all of them." Brookleap stepped forward. "I'm staying here."

There was a stunned silence from all the cats. Then Ferncloud spoke. "You can't leave your Clan now!"

"He is free to choose," murmured Tallpoppy. His eyes rested on Storm, his gaze gentle and understanding.

"Silverstream's kit would not make such a decision lightly," Fireheart put in.

Sandstar looked thoughtfully at Brookleap. "I remember how hard it was for Silverstream to choose Graystripe over his Clan," he mewed. "But from that difficult choice, you and Feathertail were born. Without you both, everything would have been different for the Tribe and for the Clans. Feathertail killed Sharptooth, and you finished a difficult journey to bring Starclan's message back to us. No cat can question your loyalty and courage, nor criticize your choice, for as your father proved, great things come from listening to your heart."

Approving murmurs echoed around the cave until Leopardstar silenced the cats with a sharp yowl.

Bramblepaw's pelt prickled. Would Leopardstar let his warrior go?

The Riverclan leader stared at Brookleap, his eyes narrowed. "Brookleap," he meowed at last, "Riverclan will miss your courage and skill, but so much has changed in our lives that it is not impossible we will meet again, in this life or the next." He dipped his head, accepting Brookleap's decision without anger. "I wish you well."

Storm brushed her tail against Brookleap's flanks as the Clans filed slowly out of the cave. Bramblepaw looked sadly back at her friend, wishing he could at least be part of the patrol that would accompany them to the edge of the Tribe's territory. But Brookleap stayed where he was, his brown tabby pelt glowing in the shimmering light of the waterfall, his eyes betraying the depths of his grief. However much he wanted to live with the Tribe, Bramblepaw knew that watching the Clans leave without him must be like losing Graystripe, Feathertail, and Silverstream all over again.

"Do you think he'll be all right?" she asked Squirrelflight.

He gave her ear a swift lick. "I do."

They followed the other cats out of the gorge and up into the peaks, the sun to one side of them as they headed along the mountain range.

"Do you think they're taking us the right way?" she whispered to Squirrelflight.

Squirrelflight blinked. "I hope so." He craned his neck. "It does seem to be the same direction we saw the star fall. I just hope they don't lead us too far and we miss it."

As he spoke, the Tribe cats veered their path and headed down through a winding pass. The ground suddenly fell away and the land rolled ahead of them, hill after hill, grassy here, shadowed with woodland there. From where the Clan stood, on the edge of the mountains, the greenness seemed strange after the endless gray and white of the crags. In the sunshine Bramblepaw could see

streams glimmering among the bare trees like silver birch bark in an oak forest.

"Is that it?" Squirrelflight breathed.

"'Hills, oak woods for shelter, running streams.'" Bramblepaw found herself quoting Midnight's prophecy.

"But there's so much of it!" Rowanclaw had slipped beside them. "How will we know where to stop?"

Squirrelflight shook his head, and they stared in silence until a flicker above their heads caught Bramblepaw's eye. Something was moving on the crest of the rocks that lined the mountain pass. Her pelt prickled with fear. Was it an eagle? She forced herself to look up and saw that it was not a bird. It was Brookleap and Storm, racing along the ridge, calling their goodbyes to the departing Clans.

As Brookleap bounded nimbly from rock to rock, Storm matched him step for step, so that their pelts brushed each other's with every leap. Brookleap's mud-slicked fur was visible only when he crossed a patch of snow, and Bramblepaw could not help thinking that the Riverclan cat looked almost Tribe-born.

Chapter 25

Crowpaw shook the drizzle from her whiskers and padded after the others up the heather-covered slope. They had trekked all morning, leaving the snow and mountains behind, chased by the rain that rolled down from the mountains after them.

"Have you noticed Tallstar?" Brackenfur whispered, padding beside her.

The Windclan leader was walking beside Smokefur through the banks of heather. Despite the rain, she no longer leaned against Smokefur's flank, but padded confidently, as if she finally believed she was within reach of her Clan's new home. She pricked her ears as a rabbit darted from a boulder farther ahead. Smokefur glanced at his leader, and, when Tallstar nodded, he darted after the rabbit. Tornear and Webfoot raced up the slope after him.

"I think the smell of the heather has given Windclan some of their old spirit back," Crowpaw purred.

All the cats seemed more relaxed than they had been in the mountains, not just Windclan. Blackstar padded next to Sandstar. Ferncloud walked alongside Russetfur, the heather brushing his flecked flank as he talked comfortably to the Shadowclan deputy.

"I never thought I'd see Ferncloud so comfortable around the other Clans," Crowpaw commented.

"He'll soon be back to his old self," Brackenfur replied matter-of-factly, "once we're settled in our new home and things are back to normal."

"There will always be four Clans," Crowpaw murmured, half to herself. But would there really? Looking around, she realized with a shock that it was impossible to tell from the throng of cats where one Clan ended and another began.

"I'm just glad to be out of the mountains," Brackenfur mewed. "Brookleap was brave to stay."

"He had so little left in the Clans," Crowpaw murmured.

"Well, I'd rather be here," Brackenfur decided.

"Even though we don't know where we're heading?" Crowpaw asked her, surprised.

"Look at this place!" Brackenfur flicked her tail at the land around them. "No sign of monsters or churned earth. And it's good to smell prey again." She swiped her tongue around her lips.

As she spoke Smokefur came trotting back toward the Clans, a rabbit dangling from his jaws. Crowpaw knew she was right—this place felt safer than anywhere they had been for many days and nights—but with no sign from Starclan, was it really their new home?

"Crowpaw!"

Cinderpelt's voice shocked her into wakefulness. She blinked open her eyes. It was still dark.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, struggling to her paws and staring around the shadowy copse where the Clans had sheltered for the night. A chilly wind whipped between the trees.

"Sandstar wants to set off as early as possible," Cinderpelt told her.

"Why can't we stay here?" Crowpaw heard Whitekit's fretful mew and, as her eyes became accustomed to the predawn light, she saw him staring up at his mother, crouched between the roots of a tree.

"We can't stop yet." Squirrelflight's deep mew rang out before Dustpelt could reply. "Starclan will tell us when we have found our new home."

"But the sign might come if we wait here," Ferncloud meowed.

"Wait here?" Mudclaw glared at the Thunderclan cats. "These trees

may feel like home to you, but not to us."

"The streams here aren't wide enough for fish," Leopardstar pointed out.

Bramblepaw nodded. "We must keep going."

"Going where, exactly?" Hawkfrost growled.

Bramblepaw narrowed her eyes. "Do we have to know everything?"

Squirrelflight flicked his tail to silence her, then glanced at Cinderpelt. "Have you had any sign from Starclan?"

Cinderpelt shook his head. "Not me. But Crowpaw had a dream," he meowed.

Crowpaw's heart lurched as the eyes of all the Clans turned to her, gleaming in the half-light. "I-I don't know if it was a sign," she mewed quickly. "I dreamed I sat before a great stretch of shining water..."

"Shining water?" Leopardstar interrupted. "You mean a river?"

Crowpaw shook her head. "No, not a river. These waters were smooth, not churning. I could see Silverpelt reflected, all the stars shining as clearly as if they were swimming in the sky."

"Is that all?" Blackstar demanded.

"Spottedleaf was there too, and he told me Starclan would find us," Crowpaw forced herself to meet the Shadowclan leader's gaze even though her legs were shaking.

"So we should head for water?" Tallstar mewed hopefully.

Crowpaw's ears twitched. "I think it was just a dream," she whispered. "I've had no sign from Starclan since." She looked unhappily at her paws. "I'm beginning to think I just dreamed what I wanted to."

"Then we have nothing," Blackstar muttered, turning away.

"Are you sure it was just a dream?" Squirrelflight asked Crowpaw.

She searched her heart for the truth. "I don't know."

She had never been wrong about her dreams before, but if the dream had really carried a message from their warrior ancestors, wouldn't some sign—a falling star, another dream—have told them by now that Starclan was with them in this strange place?

"Well, we'll just have to keep going." Squirrelflight padded out from the trees. A grassy bank sloped down in front of him to a narrow valley. Beyond, a ridge rose into the indigo sky, its curving side shadowed by forest.

As the cats began to pad out of the copse, still blinking and stretching, Crowpaw glanced up at the sky. Clouds obscured the stars.

"Don't worry about the sign." Her father's voice surprised her, and she turned to find him standing beside her. "You are still an apprentice medicine cat," he murmured. "You shouldn't feel responsible if Starclan wishes to remain silent."

She gazed gratefully into his leaf-green eyes as he went on. "I'm proud of you. And Bramblepaw too—even though Cinderpelt's prophecy frightened me for a while."

"Cinderpelt's prophecy?" Crowpaw echoed.

"Starclan's sign that fire and tiger would destroy the Clan."

Crowpaw blinked. Cinderpelt's ominous warning seemed a lifetime away now.

"Now I think I understand what it meant." Sandstar gazed after Bramblepaw and Squirrelflight as they led the cats down into the valley. Their fur glowed like the moon and its shadow in the gloom. "The cat with the dark ginger pelt and the cat with stripes like a tiger did destroy the Clan," he meowed. "But not as I feared they would. They led us from our old home, away from danger and into the unknown. Many would have been put off by the difficulties that faced them, but they held on to their faith and brought us all to

safety." He glanced at Rowanclaw and Leaffeather prowling protectively on either side of the Clans. "The cats who first crossed the mountains—whether they are still with us or live among other warriors—will always be honored by every Clan for their courage."

He flicked his tail, then bounded away to catch up with Fireheart. Crowpaw felt a surge of pride in her sister, and gratitude to her father for being willing to trust Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw to lead them to a place of safety.

She wove her way to Brackenfur's side as they reached the foot of the slope and began to climb upward again on the other side of the valley.

"I'm hungry," Brackenfur complained.

"It's nearly dawn," Crowpaw answered her. "I'm sure we can hunt then."

"At least it looks like good hunting territory here," Brackenfur commented, looking around at the young beech trees that crowded the slope.

Crowpaw recognized her sister's voice drifting from up ahead. "I can smell prey and leaves and ferns like we had back in the forest!" Bramblepaw bounded back to them. "I hope we get some sort of sign here." She peered through the trees to where Squirrelflight's pelt flitted through the shadows like a fish. "I hope he's all right. He's hardly spoken today."

"He's just worried," Crowpaw reassured her.

"What do you think the sign will be?" Brackenfur fretted.

Crowpaw shook her head. "I don't know," she admitted. Beneath the trees, she could hardly see a pawstep in front of her, but she followed the scents of her Clanmates as they climbed steadily upward.

As if every cat were waiting for something, tension rippled through the Clans, stiffening muscles and making pelts bristle. No cat spoke as they reached the top of the ridge. They filed along its treeless

crest in a single line, silhouetted against the murky sky. A cool wind breathed over them, and Crowpaw felt it ruffle her fur. She closed her eyes for a moment and sent a desperate prayer to Starclan.

Let Spottedleaf's words be true. Show me you are waiting for us, she begged.

The breeze grew stronger, tugging at her fur, and far above them the clouds shifted to reveal the moon, shining round and bright onto the cats below.

Crowpaw opened her eyes, and her breath caught in her throat. On the far side of the ridge, the ground sloped steeply away to a vast, smooth expanse of water. All the stars of Silverpelt were reflected in the lake, glittering silver against indigo-black, as if they were swimming in the night sky.

Crowpaw's heart flooded with joy. She knew with all her heart that they had reached the end of their journey. Her faith had been enough, and their warrior ancestors had been waiting for them all along.

She lifted her gaze. The distant horizon was reddening as dawn began to push away the night, gradually revealing more of the Clans' new home.

This is the place we were meant to find, and Starclan is here.

Another book finished! As I said I will be taking a break before I start Starlight. This series will return on January 6th! I will upload the Allegiance for Starlight on January 5th! Happy Holidays everyone! And have a Happy New Year!